THE GIRLS' ETON

MAY BALDWIN.

She danced and stamped upon the little table.

THE GIRLS' ETON

BY

MAY BALDWIN

Author of 'Two Schoolgirls of Florence,' 'Barbara Bellamy,' 'Sarah's School Friend,' &c.

ILLUSTRATED

by

Percy Tarrant

LONDON: 38 Soho Square, W.
W. & R. CHAMBERS, LIMITED
EDINBURGH: 339 High Street

Edinburgh:
Printed by W. & R. Chambers, Limited.
1921

TO

MY FRIEND AND SCHOOLFELLOW

ADELINE RUTH BURNE

PREFACE.

THE writer would state, in fairness to the famous school to which a likeness may be detected, that the story is a work of fiction, and that, though it is founded on fact, many of the incidents mentioned never happened at this particular school, nor were the characters all educated there. This explanation is due to the well-known Head-mistress, who so kindly gave the author a free entrance to her school at all times.

CONTENTS.

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	AN ODD WELCOME	1
II.	KATHERINE KERR	12
III.	GOOD-BYE TO THE HIGHLANDS	23
IV.	AND AWAY SOUTH	34
V.	'WHERE IS ALISTAIR?'	43
VI.	WHERE ALISTAIR WAS	54
VII.	'THE GIRLS' ETON'	65
VIII.	NEW GIRLS	75
IX.	AN EXTRAORDINARY SUPPER	85
X.	LORNE HOUSE AND ITS INMATES	94
XI.	TWO IMPOSSIBLE PUPILS	104
XII.	THE TAMING OF THE TWO NEW GIRLS	114
XIII.	STRANGE IDEAS	123
XIV.	SCHOOL AND PLAY	132
XV.	SCHOOL-LIFE	142
XVI.	AN UNPLEASANT INTERVIEW	150
XVII.	ALICE AND ALISTAIR	160
XVIII.	AN UNCOMFORTABLE RIDE	170
XIX.	KATHERINE'S CASTLES IN THE AIR	181
XX.	ALISTAIR BEGINS AN ODD FRIENDSHIP	191
XXI.	SCOTCH VERSUS ENGLISH	201
XXII.	ALISTAIR'S ODD WAYS	210
XXIII.	A STARTLING APPEARANCE	221
XXIV.	A LACROSSE MATCH	231
XXV.	GONE TO THE BOTTOM	241
XXVI.	CHANGES OF FRIENDSHIP AND OTHER THINGS	251
XXVII.	THE ADVERTISEMENT DANCE	261
XXVIII.	THE MYSTERY OF THE CHALLENGE-CUPS	271
XXIX.	THE MYSTERIOUS FIND	281
XXX.	PACKING-DAY	291

THE GIRLS' ETON.

CHAPTER I.

AN ODD WELCOME.

'WHERE did you say Miss Comyns was?' inquired a fashionably dressed woman, in slight mourning, of a tall, hard-featured Scotswoman in the dress of a nurse—at least, as nurses used to be dressed in the north of Scotland in the homes of the Scotch; for now the south and its ways have invaded the north, and there are few homes now unaffected by southern influences.

And of the trio in this fine old Scottish home only the servant looked or was Scotch. The lady in complimentary mourning was unmistakably an Englishwoman, and a very stiff one, and her husband was a typical English officer, though he, to be sure, had Scottish blood.

'Is it Miss Alistair you will be meaning, ma'am?' inquired the old nurse, as she stood grim and gaunt before her questioner.

'Yes, certainly; she is the only Miss Comyns

now,' the lady added with meaning. 'And I wish to know where you said we might find her. I do not quite understand Scotch.'

'It was no Scotch, but plain English I spoke to you, ma'am, when I said Miss Alistair will be sitting on the chimney-top!'

Mrs Kerr gazed helplessly at her husband. 'James,' she said, 'you are Scotch; can't you understand?'

'It's easy enough to understand, Lettice—Scotch or not Scotch; and if you come to that, you've seen as much of Scotland as I have,' replied her husband, looking half-annoyed and half-amused.

'Then perhaps you will inform me, for the fourth time of inquiring, where your ward is, and why no one will fetch her?' retorted his wife in exasperated tones.

'Jeanie has just told you she is sitting on the top of a chimney,' replied Major Kerr.

'And, I tell you, I don't understand what that means!' reiterated his wife.

'Well, it seems pretty obvious. You know what a chimney is—Scotch ones are just like English ones, for that matter—and Alistair is sitting on the top of one of these, apparently.'

Mrs Kerr stared at her husband, and from him turned to stare at Jeanie in silence for a minute. She seemed to be trying to compel her imagination to picture a young lady of thirteen sitting on the top of a chimney—on a chimney-pot, in

fact; but apparently failed in the attempt, for she murmured at last, 'Impossible!'

'Begging your pardon, ma'am, and that it may be for you and the Major—for me too—but Miss Alistair thinks nothing of it; she's like a squirrel on climbing, and it's very unbecoming in the laird's daughter, I've told her many a time; but her aunt was fine and blind to her doings, and if a body said a word she'd answer, "Let her be; she has had weak health, and this open-air, free life will be the making of her, and she'll be cooped up enough when she goes south to school." They were Miss Comyns's own words, ma'am.'

'Do I understand that Miss Comyns encouraged Miss Alistair to—to climb over the house-top and sit on—chimney-pots?' inquired Mrs Kerr again of her husband. She seemed to imagine that he could explain things somehow.

But it was Jeanie who replied, in fierce defence of the dead. 'Miss Comyns was a lady, ma'am, as much as yoursel', and Miss Alistair wouldn't have done it if she had been here; it's only yoursel's have frightened her up there, and she says she won't come down till you've gone to bed.'

This time Mrs Kerr was speechless, unless an eloquent look she cast at her husband may be called speaking.

'Perhaps I had better go and look her up,' observed Major Kerr, with a look of amusement on his face as he took up his hat.

'James, I won't have it; why should you go climbing on roofs to talk to a child of thirteen? Let us begin as we mean to go on, and teach her respect for her guardian—if, indeed, you really persist in assuming that responsibility,' his wife wound up.

'Of course I do; it's only for two years; and, besides, she'll tone down in no time in London, with Katherine's good example before her. And as for having respect for us, she has too much, poor little thing! I dare say she is up there on the roof shivering and shaking, like the little monkey she is!' declared the Major.

Jeanie, the nurse, opened her square, determined mouth to speak, but shut it again with a snap, second thoughts being apparently best.

'It will be a nice thing if she climbs on to our roof, James; it is a very steep and dangerous one, and, remember, the responsibility is entirely yours. I wash my hands of it,' announced Mrs Kerr.

'We'll send a fireman after her if she tries it on in London,' said Major Kerr jocosely.—'And now, Jeanie, if you will show me the way, I'll see if I can raise the siege.'

He rose as he spoke, and Mrs Kerr rose with him, and the pair followed Jeanie out of the room and into the spacious square hall, across which the nurse stalked ahead out of the glass-paned front-door.

In front of the house was a wide gravel-circle,

to which a long drive led, and it was across the gravel-circle and down the drive that Jeanie made her way in silence.

'James, is the woman cracked? Where is she taking us? Surely it is not on to somebody else's roof your niece has climbed?' demanded Mrs Kerr in an undertone, as she looked after the nurse, who was walking on with the free, swinging step of a Highland peasant.

Major Kerr laughed. 'The house is high, Lettice; we have to get away from it to reconnoitre and place the enemy.'

That he was right Mrs Kerr now discovered for herself; for Jeanie turned abruptly, and having waited for the Major and his wife to get up to her, she pointed to a chimney in the left wing of the house, on which something could be seen.

'There's Miss Alistair, Major,' she said shortly, giving her charge the name she had been known by during her aunt's life, who would be the only Miss Comyns to Jeanie as long as she lived.

The Major, who was short-sighted, put up his eyeglasses and surveyed his niece.

'How did she get there?' he demanded.

'Through a trap-door in one of the attics,' replied Jeanie.

'Then we ought to be able to do the same,' declared the Major; adding to his wife, who was just going to object, 'We must get her down, Lettice; it's getting dark and she can't stay up

there all night, and I'm not going to bed before she comes down—that's flat! Besides, it's ridiculous to be set at defiance by a chit of thirteen. Poor little soul!' he wound up.

'We shall have to break open the door, then, for Miss Alistair locked it after her, or one of the men would have been up before this to take her your message,' observed Jeanie.

'Very well; break open the door,' said the Major.

'It's most undignified,' protested his wife.

'Dignity be fiddlesticked! The mountain won't come to Mahomet, so Mahomet must go to the mountain,' replied the Major with decision.

'It does not happen to be a mountain at all, but a naughty girl. I should very soon have her down without going an inch out of my way to get her,' said Mrs Kerr with equal decision.

'How, pray?' inquired Major Kerr, stopping short in his walk for a moment to see if his wife, who managed her own family very well, had really any better plan to suggest.

'I should make the roof too hot to hold her,' replied his wife briefly.

It was well for Mrs Kerr that she did not see the look Jeanie bestowed on her.

'Smoke her out, eh? I don't think we'll begin our acquaintance that way,' said the Major dryly; 'not to mention that, if I know anything of the Comyns blood, it would be more likely to keep her up there for the rest of our stay, for she could

easily move on a little or sit astride the tiles themselves.'

'And you 're right about Miss Alistair, sir, for the Comynses have all wild blood in them, and Miss Alistair, she 's the wildest of the lot,' put in Jeanie, speaking strongly, in the hopes of warning Mrs Kerr to be gentle with the girl.

But her words had better have been left unsaid, for they only deepened the unfavourable impression she had already received of her future charge.

By this time, however, they had reached the house. Jeanie was, by the Major's desire, leading the way to the attic, accompanied by the locksmith.

The lock being removed, and the trap-door being open, the Major carefully and cautiously mounted the stairs and put his hand and a silver-covered packet out on to the roof. Then, just lifting himself till his eye was above the aperture, he took aim and threw the packet into his niece's lap.

He had no fear of startling her, for she was looking with her keen, bright eyes straight towards the open trap-door, and sat there holding tightly to the chimney-pot, *upon* which, however, she was not sitting, but only astride it.

The packet fell open, and Alistair's lap, or rather that half of it which the Major could see, was full of chocolates.

The face, half-defiant, half-fearful, brightened, and a ringing laugh was his reward.

'Come down and say a word of welcome, Alistair. This isn't a very friendly way of behaving; it's not like a Highland lassie,' said her uncle in reproachful tones.

'I can't be like the false southron!' said Alistair hotly, and for a moment she looked as if she were going to throw her uncle's peace-offering back at him.

'This is much more like the greeting a southron would give than a Highlander. In fact, even they wouldn't be so inhospitable as to let guests, who had travelled night and day to see them, arrive at an empty house with not a word of welcome from the hostess. I've never been treated so badly in my life,' said the Major in injured tones.

This was an artful speech on the part of the Major, and his niece retorted hastily, but with a flush on her face, 'The Comynses do not welcome their enemies; but I forgot you were tired. I will come down and give orders that you have tea. Is your wife here too?'

'Yes; but we are your relations, not your enemies, though we have come to take you from your beloved Craigie. Your aunt Lettice has come; she left her own child and all her engagements at once to come to you, Alistair,' said her uncle, as he held out a helping hand (which his niece ignored), and watched a tall, leggy girl wriggle along the roof, and then rear herself upright preparatory to descending the trap-door ladder. The Major very

nearly cried out to her to take care, as he saw her standing on the sloping tiles, down the steep slope of which it seemed as if she must slide; but he fortunately stopped in time, and withdrew to let his niece come down into the attic.

Mrs Kerr, who was not so cold-hearted as she chose to appear, and who had been watching the performance from the drive, gave a gasp of relief as she saw the girl safely disappear into the house, and with a muttered 'Thank Heaven!' returned to the house to greet her husband's niece, whose clear, musical voice, with its strong Scotch accent, could be heard talking to her uncle in what his wife was glad to notice was a quite friendly tone. Though how he had managed her, and put an end to the awkward position with dignity, the wife—who was under the delusion that she managed him and every one else—could not imagine. The chocolates remained the Major's secret.

Mrs Kerr had another surprise when the door of the dining-room, where she was awaiting her new charge, opened, and Alistair Comyns, a tall, thin, auburn-haired girl—whose age one would guess to be sixteen rather than thirteen—came in with a smile and words of welcome.

'I'm sorry I was not here to welcome you; I forgot it was my duty. I hope you have been attended to and feel a little rested, Mrs Kerr,' she said.

'Thank you. I am glad to see you, Alistair.

We came the moment we heard of your sad loss,' said Mrs Kerr kindly, as she took the girl's hand, drawing her gently towards her, and would have kissed her, ignoring the stiff way of addressing her as 'Mrs Kerr.'

But Alistair's too expressive face changed. The bright, almost mischievous, expression disappeared swiftly, as she withdrew her hand and averted her cheek, while she made violent but ineffectual efforts to control herself and keep back the tears.

The Major, wisely or unwisely, put his arm round her, and, drawing her against her will towards him, said gently, 'Don't cry, dear; we will take care of you till your father and mother come home, and that is only two years off; and I am your mother's brother, you know.'

Then the floodgates of Alistair's sorrow were opened, and she sobbed so violently and unrestrainedly that Mrs Kerr was frightened.

At last, when she had exhausted her tears and herself, the Major laid her gently down upon the hard dining-room sofa, and in a few minutes her eyes closed; she drew a long, sobbing breath and—went fast asleep.

The Major, with eyes that looked suspiciously bright, smiled at his wife; but she did not smile back at him.

'And this is the savage we are to take back with us to a civilised country and into a well-conducted

'This isn't a very friendly way of behaving; it's not like a Highland lassie.'

house!' she exclaimed in subdued but angry tones.

'Oh, it's not so bad as all that; she's easily tamed, as you see, and Katherine will work wonders. She will be all right with Katherine.'

CHAPTER II.

KATHERINE KERR.

IN a tall, substantial-looking corner house of a West-End London square, behind spotless white curtains, which veiled an equally clean window, sat a tall, slender girl of nearly sixteen, writing on a sheet of foolscap paper, which lay on the writing-board on her knee.

Every now and then she would look out of the window up at the tiny bit of gray sky which was visible between the white window-curtains, and her blue eyes would take a dreamy, far-off look as she threw back her head and murmured something about 'Gray skies flitting, and gray clouds hiding the sunshine of her life.' Then came an impatient shake of herself, as she said in quite another tone, 'It's because I can't feel it, and of course I can't write it if I don't; perhaps when I see her I shall feel the sympathy, and then I shall be able to write "The Overshadowed Life." Yes; it's no good—I must wait till she comes. So, after all, I am glad she is coming; I can study her grief and put it into verse. Anyway, it is not such an unmitigated bore, and if I find her too great a nuisance I have this room to take refuge in. She shall never come in here—that I have quite determined upon, and mamma agrees.'

Then the brown head looked down at the paper again, and the absent look came over the girl's face once more. There was a few minutes' pause; then the pen ran on again—this time swiftly, and in a very few minutes the rest of the foolscap page was filled.

A very happy look came over the girl's face, and the lady who gently turned the handle of the door and came in thought what a very pretty girl her niece Katherine was becoming. 'Well, Katherine, dreaming as usual?' she asked with a pleasant laugh.

'Oh Aunt Amy, I never heard you. Did you knock?' inquired Katherine, as she jumped up and hastily shut the cover of her writing-board upon her latest effusion, regardless of the fact that it was wet.

'You'll smudge your letter, Katherine,' observed her aunt.

'It doesn't matter; it wasn't a letter. Besides, my fountain-pen almost dries as it writes,' said Katherine.

She was very truthful, as will be seen, and would not let her aunt's mistake pass, much though she disliked any one knowing of her poetical productions. For Katherine Kerr wrote poetry, and she had this afternoon just written another poem. Her aunt Amy was too wise to ask what Katherine had been writing. As a matter of fact, she guessed that it was a poem; nor was she very anxious to

read it, having read some of Katherine's former compositions; though the girl did not know this.

Mrs Kerr, who had her daughter's full confidence, kept Katherine's poems in a secret drawer in her davenport, and she had read one or two of those she thought the best to an audience of two, consisting of her husband and her sister Amy.

The Major stared, then laughed and said, 'Upon my word, not bad for a girl of fifteen! Who'd have thought of our little Katherine turning poet? I wonder where she gets it from. Not me, I'm sure—never could read a word of poetry in my life; and you're not the sentimental sort either, Lettice.'

But Mrs Kerr replied stiffly, 'I can appreciate poetry even if I do not write it, and I much appreciate our daughter's talent.'

'Yes, she has talent,' agreed Miss Dolling, Mrs Kerr's younger sister, and that was all the comment she made upon the verses. So now, instead of pursuing the subject, she observed, as she took a seat opposite her niece, 'And so your cousin arrives to-morrow?'

'Yes,' said Katherine with a sigh.

'What's the sigh for? Sympathy for the cause of Alistair's advent, or sympathy for yourself for having your private sanctum invaded?' inquired Miss Dolling.

'Oh, my sanctum won't be invaded. I shall never allow her to come in here; it would never

do,' replied Katherine hastily. Her face was quite changed; she was no longer the dreamy poetess, but the quick, determined daughter of her mother.

'Why wouldn't it do? I should have thought you would have been sorry for Alistair in her sad loss, and be trying to think what you could do to comfort her, instead of making plans to shut her out of your room,' replied Miss Dolling.

'I am sorry for Alistair. But, after all, it is not as if she had lost her father or mother; it is only that funny aunt, who seems to have brought her up very badly,' objected Katherine.

'I thank you,' observed Miss Dolling very dryly. 'I shall not expect you to shed any tears over me.'

'Of course I did not mean that, Aunt Amy. You are not like Miss Comyns; besides, you are more like an elder sister to me—a really nice elder sister, I mean—and I should miss you dreadfully if—if anything happened to you!' cried Katherine, as her eyes filled with tears.

Miss Dolling melted at once, and assured Katherine that she had only been teasing her. 'Indeed, I know that I am a very privileged person, being allowed to come into this sanctum when I will. But poor Alistair, I can't help thinking of her and being sorry for her. She will find London so strange after her free life in the Highlands,' she added.

'A great deal too free, and I don't know what that aunt can have been thinking about. She

seems to have let that child of thirteen rule the whole household, and even manage the estate; at least mamma says every one, even the steward, does just what she wishes, and it's Alistair who orders which horses and carriage are to be used. It's a very good thing she is coming to be civilised —for her, at least,' said Katherine.

Miss Dolling did not take any notice of this last remark, nor of her niece's patronising attitude to a girl not quite three years her junior. She only replied, 'I wonder if she will call me Aunt Amy?'

'Of course not; she is no relation to you,' replied Katherine, with a flush of annoyance.

'I should like her to call me so, all the same,' returned her aunt, ignoring the little outburst of jealousy on Katherine's part.

'Perhaps it will make her feel less strange; she seems quite a wild savage,' agreed Katherine, with an unconscious air of superiority. She did not mean to be unkind towards her young cousin, but Katherine had been looked upon by a fond father and mother as a very superior girl; she had been looked upon in the same light by her masters and governesses, and at the very superior classes which she attended, and it is small wonder that she looked upon herself in the same light, and regarded other girls as inferior, as a rule, and her cousin Alistair, who welcomed her uncle and aunt from the top of a chimney, astride of which, according to the Major's joking account of the scene,

she was sitting. The which account did not amuse Katherine Kerr at all, but, on the contrary, shocked her, and made her less inclined than ever to welcome Alistair Comyns as a sister, or even a cousin.

'I wish you had a little more of the savage in you, Katherine!' exclaimed her aunt impulsively.

Katherine looked at her aunt in astonishment. 'What *can* you mean?' she inquired.

'What *can* I mean? That's just it; you do not imagine there *can* be anything left to desire in you. You imagine you are perfect; and that you are not!' declared Miss Dolling, who seemed to be roused this afternoon, for she and her niece generally were very good friends.

'Indeed I do not, Aunt Amy; I know I am very self-willed and proud, and have no patience with stupid people or my inferiors,' said Katherine.

'The fact is, I am not sure that some of those people you call stupid and your inferiors are not your superiors!' declared her aunt, nodding her head at her niece.

'Oh, very likely. I know a very stupid girl at the literature course, who is so good and kind and so humble, I quite forgive her for being so stupid,' said Katherine, who did not seem hurt by the criticism.

'Anyway, you won't find Alistair your inferior either in brains or anything else. As a matter of fact, she is your superior in position; so be careful how you treat her,' observed Miss Dolling.

Katherine raised her head with a proud air, of which she was quite unconscious, as she was of the superior tone in which she said, 'My superior in position? What do you mean, Aunt Amy? She is just a gentleman's daughter, and so am I. Besides, she is my first cousin. I don't see what difference her father having some land in Scotland makes; an English officer is the equal of any man.'

'I was simply alluding to the fact that Alistair is an heiress to an estate, and that, being used to rule others, she may not be prepared to be ruled by you,' replied Miss Dolling.

'I don't want to rule her or any one else. In fact, I'd far rather she never came here at all, and I mean to have as little to do with her as I possibly can,' said Katherine, so emphatically that Miss Dolling began to doubt the wisdom of her warning remarks, which were having a very different effect from what she desired.

However, experience of Katherine and her determined character decided Miss Dolling not to argue on the point any more that evening, but to trust to her niece's kind heart being touched at the sight of her cousin, who would be in her deep mourning, and probably very pale and very tired after her journey.

So when the gong rang for dinner, or rather schoolroom supper, Miss Dolling accepted Katherine's stiff invitation to stay to supper, and, linking her arm in her niece's, began to tell over her doings of

the day—a way of treating her as an equal which flattered Katherine very much.

Just at this time Major and Mrs Kerr were sitting down to dinner at Craigie House with their niece Alistair, and it was just as well that Katherine could not see them, for reasons which will afterwards appear.

And now that the characters in this tale are all comfortably seated at table in their different homes, it may be a good time to explain the situation, and how it was that Alistair Comyns lived with her Scotch aunt at Craigie till the latter's death, and then was to come south to her uncle for two years more.

The explanation is that Alistair's father and mother were abroad in the West Indies, where her father had a Government appointment, and during their absence Alistair had been left in the charge of Mr Comyns's maiden sister at Craigie House till their return two years hence.

But during their absence Miss Comyns became very ill, and, like all strong women, declined to believe the fact, or 'have a word said about it to her brother or his wife to disturb their peace,' so she said.

Alistair, who was too young to know that her aunt was in danger, readily refrained, at her desire, from saying that Aunt Alistair (for she was named after her father's favourite sister) was 'not well' when she wrote to her parents abroad, and as she

very seldom wrote to her mother's brother, Major Kerr, it did not occur to her to write and tell him this fact either.

Then there came a day when Alistair Comyns the elder was obliged to own that she was very ill, and that perhaps her brother should be told; and so with characteristic courage she sat up in bed and wrote a slow and laboured letter to Mr Comyns, telling him that she was afraid it might not be God's will that she should stay long in this world, and that she would like him to come and take his daughter from her charge, so that the girl might not be 'frightened alone in this big house.'

It was not a demonstrative letter, and she said nothing of her own wish to see her brother again before she died. But Mr Comyns knew his sister's affection was deep in spite of not being demonstrative, and he and his wife were touched by her unselfish thought of Alistair, rather than of herself, when the letter arrived; but this, alas! was not until after her death, the first news of which came by cable from the house steward.

'Oh Ian—poor Alistair!' the mother cried, as the tears came into her eyes; and the husband knew that though the tears were for his sister, it was of her young daughter that his wife was thinking.

'Poor Alistair that's gone, and poor Alistair that's left,' he replied sadly, as he tried to consider rapidly what would be the best thing to do.

'Of course we must go home at once; but even

so we shall be too late for the funeral. And what are we to do about Alistair?' asked his wife.

That was the question: what were they to do about Alistair—now, and when they got home, where they could only stay a short time? 'Perhaps you had better go alone?' suggested her husband doubtfully, as difficulties in the way of his leaving his post occurred to him.

But this Mrs Comyns would not hear of. 'I will never leave you, Ian,' she declared; and her husband, who could not bear to part with her, was distracted between the call of duty, which bade him stay there, and the call of affection, which bade him take the first steamer back to Craigie House, where his dead sister lay, with his only child to act as sole mourner and mistress. And they were still sitting sadly with the cable in their hands when another was brought in by the native servant.

Mr Comyns tore it open in dread of further tragic news, and his wife clasped her hands; but it was with a relieved face that the former turned to his wife and said, 'This is kind—it is from your brother James; he has read of our sad loss in the papers. Alistair never thought of sending to tell them, it appears, and he says he will go up north at once with his wife, and take Alistair home with them till we return.'

'How like Jamie—he is so kind-hearted! I never thought of him,' cried Major Kerr's sister.

A cable accepting his offer with thanks had not

been despatched many hours, when a third arrived from Alistair:

'I will not leave Craigie, or live in England. I shall be quite safe here with Jeanie, and Donald and I will manage the land for you till you come home.'

Perhaps this telegram helped to decide the father and mother that two years in England, 'under Katherine's influence,' would be good for Alistair, and that, under the circumstances, it was no good to hurry home for a short visit.

'If we could have seen her, I would have made an effort to arrange affairs; but now—now that it is too late—what is the good? Lettice will be kind to our Alistair; Katherine will be a very good example for her,' said Mr Comyns.

And so another telegram was sent to Alistair to tell her that she must go to London with her uncle and aunt since they were so kind as to come and fetch her.

And the result of this last message was to send Alistair on to the roof, from which coign of vantage she watched her uncle and aunt's arrival, and from which refuge she was bribed to descend by the Major by dint of chocolates and coaxing.

But this episode neither Major nor Mrs Kerr related in their letters to the West Indies, not being sure that it would amuse her parents as much as it did the Major, who chuckled when he related the story at his club after his return to London.

CHAPTER III.

GOOD-BYE TO THE HIGHLANDS.

MAJOR KERR—who had made himself very much at home in the Highlands, and quite won the heart of Donald the steward, and, harder matter still. that of Jeanie, Alistair's nurse—knew all about the telegram his niece had sent; in fact, it was as well that Alistair, who thought her word was law in her Highland home, did not know that Donald, after much heart-searching and doubtful shakes of the head, had secretly taken it to the Major, his mistress's brother and own uncle to his young mistress, and asked if it was his pleasure it should go.

'Yes, yes, Donald; let it go—a child has the right to say what she likes to her parents, and they have the right to know what she feels. They will understand her. Send the cable, by all means,' said the Major.

So Donald, privately much relieved that loyalty to Miss Alistair and to her uncle did not clash, despatched the cablegram; to which her parents replied by kindly and firmly telling Alistair that they wished her to go south with her uncle and aunt, with whom and with her cousin Katherine she would live very happily till their return, they assured her.

It was the morning after this cable had been received by Alistair that that young lady, her hair a great mop round her head, came into the breakfast-room, where her uncle and aunt were having a tardy breakfast, early hours—Highland hours of eight o'clock breakfast—not being congenial to the ease-loving Major or his fashionable wife.

'Good-morning, Uncle James!—Good-morning!'—this, without the name added, to his wife, whom hitherto Alistair had called 'Mrs Kerr,' until her uncle objected. 'I hope you have both been well served?' she said, as she stood erect inside the door and faced her uncle and aunt by marriage, whom Alistair refused to acknowledge as a relation, owing to her being English, without one drop of Scottish blood to redeem her.

'Yes, thank you, Alistair; Mrs Mackenzie has kept up the reputation for Highland breakfasts. I shall quite miss them when we go south,' replied her uncle.

'Which, however, we must do to-morrow,' added his wife quietly.

'I am sorry, for I will not be ready to start then,' announced Alistair just as quietly.

Mrs Kerr looked quickly at Alistair and then at her husband, who, however, was eating his fish, which seemed to require all his attention. Mrs Kerr gave him another rather indignant look, at what she considered a shirking of his duty by her husband; and then, clearing her throat, began in

a cold, clear voice, which Alistair hated as English, 'I am sorry your things are not ready; but it will not matter, for Jeanie can very well pack them after we have gone and send them after you.'

Alistair gave a slight start; then she raised her head like a stag at bay, as her uncle, who had cast a covert glance at her, thought to himself.

'Jeanie cannot pack after I have gone, for she is coming with me; I will not live without Jeanie. And it is not only my "things," as you call them, that will not be ready—it is I myself,' she said in passionate accents.

'I am sorry, Lettice; but, as it happens, I cannot be ready to-morrow,' began the Major. His wife looked at him in surprise, for her husband had, not ten minutes ago, agreed to start the next morning, and here he was, without the smallest pretext, announcing that he had found he could not be ready. Of course, she said to herself, it was to please Alistair and to suit her plans that he upset those of his wife. She set her lips in displeasure and said not a word. The Major had chosen to enter into the fray and contradict her plans. He should fight the battle or capitulate to the enemy himself; she would not give way one inch to this headstrong Scotch girl.

The Major, after waiting a minute in vain for his wife to agree—he knew she would not contradict him—continued, 'So we can travel down south together next week—eh, Alistair?'

'Yes, Uncle James,' agreed Alistair, appeased by her uncle's ready agreement with her plans.

'And I will get some more shooting, which I did not expect. I wanted a holiday, you know, Lettice, and now that I am here it is a pity not to stay a week longer, since I am obliged by sad circumstances to remain here,' observed Major Kerr.

His wife listened quietly to this lame explanation, but she was too well controlled to show displeasure for more than a moment, and said, 'Yes, you will certainly enjoy some shooting. I will telegraph to Katherine that we shall not be home for another week. She will be disappointed at another week of holidays alone.'

This was another view of the case, and had the effect of dashing her husband's satisfaction in the arrangement of the matter, as she had intended it should do. But it had an effect which she had not intended or expected, and that was upon Alistair, who said impetuously, 'Oh, I had not thought of Katherine. She will want her mother, and it is her holidays. Of course I will be ready to-morrow. Mrs Mackenzie can pack up anything I leave behind. I am not taking much; it is only for a time.'

'There's a good girl, Alistair; we'll give you a good time in London. You shall see a cinematograph—I'll be bound you've never seen such a thing—and the Zoo, and all sorts of things!' cried the Major.

Mrs Kerr smiled slightly. She refrained from asking her husband how he had managed to arrange his affairs so that he should be ready next day. She was only too glad to leave this out-of-the-way place, where they had no society and could not receive or pay calls under the circumstances.

'I will be busy all day, for I have many things to do, so I will say good-morning,' said Alistair, turning and leaving the room swiftly, but not before her uncle had seen that her lips were quivering and her eyes bright with the tears she would not let drop.

'Very nice of the girl to give way so—so—nicely,' he said when she had gone.

'It seems to me that we are giving way—not she. She first announces that she should not be ready for a week. By the way, James, I wish you would tell her not to say "will" instead of "shall;" it is so ugly, and it is bad grammar,' said his wife, who felt rather irritated and was glad of a vent for her irritation.

'Ugly, do you call it? Now, I was just thinking how prettily she talks. I like that soft Scotch accent, and that way of saying "will." It reminds me of my youth. I am Scotch too, you know, Lettice,' he reminded her.

'No one would know it, and it will be bad for Katherine to be in constant companionship with a girl who talks bad grammar and has an impossible accent,' she said testily.

Mrs Kerr had not taken to her husband's niece from the moment of her first arrival. She was shocked at a girl of her size (for Alistair was taller than Katherine, who was her senior by nearly three years, and looked, Mrs Kerr thought, sixteen at least) climbing on to the roof to get out of the way of an uncle and aunt who had come, hastening north, travelling day and night, to comfort the child in her sorrow. It certainly was not a friendly way of greeting relatives, and Mrs Kerr wished more than ever that her husband had been firm from the beginning with his niece, instead of weakly climbing up through trap-doors to coax her down.

Moreover, though she would have been very indignant if any one had said so to her, she was feeling a little jealous at her plans being disarranged and rearranged to please this child of thirteen, and made up her mind that Alistair Comyns should be taught her place and kept in it when she got to London, where the Major was out far too much to have time to bother his head about his niece.

Meanwhile Alistair had gone to the stables, and fetching out her pony, mounted upon it bare-backed, and rode off just as she was—without hat or gloves. It had not occurred to her to tell her uncle and aunt that she was going out to pay visits, nor did it occur to her that they would be interested; and she galloped past the dining-room

window without ever looking in to wave a farewell.

As they heard the clatter of hoofs, Major and Mrs Kerr looked up from their unfinished breakfast and exclaimed. 'By Jove, how she sits!—just like her mother. And how she took that gate; you couldn't beat that in a circus!' cried the Major.

'As she doesn't happen to be a circus-rider, I think she would do better to ride in a more seemly manner,' said Mrs Kerr, who was scandalised at the sight of Alistair, her red hair and her short petticoats flying in the breeze as she jumped the gate that led through a field on to the high-road; 'and if that is all she has to do on her last day, I should like to know what she meant to do for the next week.'

'She is probably off to pay farewell calls,' observed Major Kerr. 'She knows every one, rich or poor, for twenty miles round.'

'I should not imagine she is going to pay calls in that guise!' exclaimed his wife.'

'Shouldn't you? I should,' retorted her husband; and he was right, for after lunch a motor arrived, and some friends of the Comynses appeared to call upon the Major and his wife.

Mrs Kerr, overjoyed at the sight of civilised beings in a civilised vehicle, smiled her sweetest, in spite of the slightly Scotch accent of her visitors.

'We only knew of your presence from Alistair, who came to lunch to-day,' said the lady.

'Alistair lunched with you?' said Mrs Kerr inquiringly. 'I did not know.'

'I do not suppose she knew herself; she just took us on her round. She was paying farewell visits, and she has only to-day to do them, poor child! We shall miss her here; but, as I tell her, we shall see her in town later on,' said the visitor.

'I did not know Alistair went into society; she does not give one the idea,' observed Mrs Kerr.

Her visitor laughed heartily. 'Alistair is not conventional, certainly. My husband says she is like a fresh breeze, and one of the persons he looks forward to meeting when he comes home to Rhynie. They are great friends, and have grand talks together.'

'I am so interested. I wonder if you would tell me what they talk about? I do not know my niece at all, and I should be glad to know her tastes that I may see that they are cultivated. She is—perhaps she told you—to be under my care for the next two years, and I am very anxious to do my best for her,' said Mrs Kerr.

Her face betrayed more anxiety than she knew, and at her words the face of her visitor cleared. As a matter of fact, she had come over, kind-hearted soul that she was, for the very purpose of trying to make Alistair understood by this English aunt, who was 'just a fine lady,' as her niece had described her, but who, the visitor was pleased to

find, was a conscientious woman and ready to learn about her niece. 'One of her tastes you know, and that is for riding. She is never so happy as when she is on Lassie. She will feel the confinement and bad air of London, I fear.'

'It is considered one of the healthiest towns in the world, I believe, and we live in a very large square,' said Mrs Kerr stiffly.

'Oh, quite so—quite so; only after the Highlands and an open-air life—she has lived out of doors and done what she liked. My poor friend Miss Comyns adored her, and never checked her; in fact, she relied too much upon the child, and she had too much to do on the estate,' said the other.

Mrs Kerr opened her eyes wide. 'What could she have to do on the estate? There is a steward!' she exclaimed.

'Yes; but he wanted looking after, and the tenants looked to Alistair to settle their disputes. She is a very shrewd child, and Donald has made a companion of her; so that she knows a good deal about estate management,' was the answer.

Mrs Kerr made some polite reply, but she was of opinion that her visitor was talking nonsense. That a child who fled for refuge to the house-top could have any knowledge of the estate, or have any sense at all, her aunt could not believe; at any rate, these two tastes could not be cultivated in London, and she did not feel that her visitor had been of much use so far.

This was just what that lady was thinking herself, and she said, 'She is very fond of reading too; she is reader in all the cottages round.'

Mrs Kerr brightened up. 'Indeed! What does she read?' she inquired with interest.

'The Bible. I believe she knows it by heart.'

'Oh!' said Mrs Kerr, who did not know her Bible at all, but who murmured something about 'How nice!'

'She knows a good deal of history—Scottish history especially—and has read all Sir Walter Scott's novels, and books of travel; but beyond that and the three R's, I fear her education has been greatly neglected. Poor dear Miss Comyns taught her herself, but she was not strong. She had been ill far longer than any of us knew, and the lessons got neglected.'

'But—surely I heard that Alistair had a governess?' cried Mrs Kerr.

'She did have one for a time; but she never taught Alistair anything, for they were always out riding. It is too late to blame any one now. Miss Comyns had her own ideas about education, and she always said Alistair had plenty of time to pick up enough knowledge to pass, and she would never need to know much more than how to manage a house and estate; and that she certainly has learnt.'

After all, her visitor had taught Mrs Kerr something of the life her niece had led, which had astonished her very much, and dismayed her too;

but she said nothing of this, and thanked her informant very sincerely for her visit.

Late that evening, after the darkness had fallen, Alistair, accompanied by two stalwart Highlanders, came home, and her uncle, catching sight of her in the hall as she was on her way upstairs, saw that her eyes were red and her cheeks pale in spite of having been all day out on the moors.

CHAPTER IV.

AND AWAY SOUTH.

MAJOR KERR hesitated a moment as to whether he should take Alistair's curt good-night as final or follow her upstairs. If he had consulted his own private inclinations he would have done the former, for the Major disliked unpleasantness beyond everything; but there was a matter about which he thought Alistair ought to be spoken to before they left, and about which it would decidedly be better for him to speak now than to have a scene the next day.

The matter was Jeanie. Alistair had given her nurse orders to come south with her; Mrs Kerr had announced that she would not receive that sour-faced Jeanie into her house; and when the Major pleaded, she said she had no room for her, that Alistair would settle down much better without her, and that the London servants would not get on with this rigid Presbyterian.

The Major was of the same opinion, and in this case he thought Alistair ought to give way; so, hurrying up the stairs after his niece, he knocked at her door.

Alistair, who thought it was Jeanie, said at once, 'Come in;' but on seeing who her visitor was, added 'Oh!' in anything but flattering tones.

'I came to say good-night, Alistair, and to ask your opinion about something,' said the wily Major.

'Yes,' said Alistair, to whom this seemed quite natural, as her aunt had been in the habit of consulting her, and latterly of making her arbitrator, in all sorts of matters concerning the estate which one day would be hers.

'It's about Jeanie; I have been thinking that it will be very hard for her to be transplanted at her age,' he began in a conciliating tone.

But Alistair broke in hastily, 'She will not mind it with me; she would feel far worse if she were left here alone without me.'

'Yes, in her heart; but I was thinking of her health. You are young, and you will be with your relations; but poor Jeanie will be leaving an aged mother, so I hear'—the Major had happened to see an aged dame crossing the courtyard, who he was told was Jeanie's mother, and it struck him as a good argument for her being left behind—'and it is hard on the old mother, too. Moreover, we have not such a large house in London as you have here, and we could not even offer her a room to herself. Think how uncomfortable you will be making dear old Jeanie if you accept this sacrifice from her.'

Major Kerr had struck the right note. Alistair turned her back on him and said, 'Tell Jeanie I would rather she stopped here and—and—took care of my pets for me till I come back.'

'Which will be next summer—only a few months, after all,' said the Major cheerfully and kindly. He had seen the reflection of Alistair's face in the looking-glass when she made this great sacrifice, and he was very much touched, as well as struck by the strength in the girl's face. He hoped his wife would get on with her, and manage her 'all right,' for he felt that Alistair was a girl who would not be easy to manage, and who might turn out badly if she was mismanaged.

However, the Major was not given to looking on the dark side of things, and he went downstairs feeling much relieved, as was his wife when he told her that Alistair agreed quite sensibly to Jeanie's being left behind.

'I am very glad to hear it, for the woman would not have come if she had not agreed, and I am glad to hear the girl has some sense. I can't say I have seen any signs of it, but as you and those people she was lunching with to-day—without hat or gloves or saddle or anything—seem to think so too, she must have some brains.'

'Brains! Oh, rather; you should hear old Donald the steward. They think no end of her. They say she says the shrewdest things.'

Mrs Kerr shrugged her shoulders. She did not believe in the girl's shrewdness, but she said no more.

'It's just a beautiful morning, Miss Alistair,' said Jeanie when she went in to her young

mistress the following morning about six o'clock. There was no answer, and so old Jeanie crept gently up to the bed to waken Alistair without startling her. Not that nerves were a thing the girl was at all troubled with; still, the old nurse was very tender of her bairn, and put her hand gently on Alistair's shoulder, only to find it quivering beneath her touch. 'Miss Alistair! Miss Alistair!' she cried in alarm; 'you're no ill?'

'No; I'm quite well. Go away, Jeanie! I am going to get up at once,' replied Alistair in a muffled voice which came from beneath the bedclothes, but which the old nurse knew was muffled from another cause.

'Miss Alistair, ye mustna tak' it so; it's the Lord's will'—— began Jeanie.

But Alistair shook off her hand impatiently, and in a firmer voice repeated, 'Go away, Jeanie; I want to get up. I will ring when I am ready to have my hair done.'

Old Jeanie knew her bairn too well to persist, so she went quietly away, and returned when Alistair's bell rang for her, quite unmoved to all appearances, for Jeanie was never a very merry person, and indeed was used to look upon Alistair's fits of wild spirits as very unseemly; so now, though her heart was breaking at the thought of the separation from her beloved nursling, she showed no sign of emotion and spoke of indifferent things as she brushed Alistair's hair, avoiding

carefully any allusion to the coming parting and Alistair's journey, though the boxes stood packed before their eyes.

'Alistair—Alistair, make haste! Here are some people who want to see you!' cried the Major's voice from the distance. Major Kerr was up and fuming to be off, though they had an hour before the carriage was to be at the door. Miss Comyns had excellent horses; but motors she abhorred and would have none of, and her friends had been known to leave them at the outside lodge and walk up the long drive sooner than have to undergo a long tirade from their hostess upon the 'filthy smelling engines,' as she persisted in calling them.

Alistair gave Jeanie a hug, a very rare mark of affection with her, and hurried off before she should 'make a fool of herself.'

On arriving downstairs, she found a number of the tenants assembled to say good-bye to their young mistress. And now Mrs Kerr saw another side of her wild Highland niece's character, as she stood there amid her tenants, her eyes shining with affection, and perhaps something else, shaking hands with them all and saying good-bye for a few months, during which 'I shall know everything that goes on here, and you can make Donald write and tell me if you want me, and I'll come just as fast as the express can bring me.'

Mrs Kerr took no notice of this; she was biding her time. Nor did she take any notice of her hus-

band's unnecessary speech to the effect that 'it's only a day's journey, and if any of you find your way south, you'll find a Highland welcome from James Kerr, as good a Scotsman as yourself.'

Alistair gave a merry laugh, for her uncle's English tongue was a source of raillery with her, she professing to believe that he could not be her mother's brother at all.

So, after all, the departure was not a sad one outwardly; Jeanie was so busy packing in sandwiches and all sorts of unnecessary things that she had apparently no time for 'good-byes,' and the Major fussing and shouting out 'good-byes' and invitations to come south to every one and any one. And so they were off at last, and Alistair said good-bye to her old home and waved a handkerchief (which she managed somehow to keep dry), till the gray stone house and the fir-woods and the purple moor, with here and there a cottager standing to wave in return, had disappeared; and the bustle of the Highland station and labelling of luggage took its place, and a deep depression seized upon the girl.

Old Donald had come to the station, and he drew near now and said, 'Miss Alistair dear, the Lord will preserve you down south just as He did up here; and be sure you don't forget Him in London, for they say it's just awful wicked in yon town, and no God-fearing at all.'

'I sha'n't copy the Londoners in anything, Donald;

you need not be afraid of that,' said Alistair with a toss of her head.

'I'm glad to hear you say that, missie, for it would be a sair sight to see you come home looking like one of them.' Donald, perhaps unconsciously, cast a glance at Mrs Kerr and her maid, both of whom were dressed in the fashion, and whose dress was highly disapproved of at Craigie. Of the sin of pride Donald did not think it necessary to warn her; possibly because it did not occur to him that it was a sin. At any rate, he had no time to say more, for the express came shrieking in, and the party had only time to get themselves and their belongings comfortably seated in the reserved first-class carriage when it went off with another shriek, and Alistair, putting her head out of the window, saw Donald and the Highland servants standing bareheaded looking after them.

Suddenly Alistair withdrew her head, and sitting down abruptly, buried herself in one of the papers with which the Major had piled up the racks. She could bear no more, and till Edinburgh was reached not a word could the kindly uncle get from her, not a morsel would she eat. And they were obliged to let her go to sleep in her sleeping-berth without having eaten or drunk anything since she had made a pretence of breakfasting at Craigie.

'And then she only drank a cup of tea and

crumbled some oatcake,' said the Major in distress to his wife.

'Give her some of her nurse's sandwiches,' suggested his wife; 'perhaps she'll eat them from sentiment.'

'She won't look at them; I expect she's afraid of breaking down if she sees Highland food,' said her husband.

'Oh, well, a day's starvation won't hurt her—a great healthy girl like that; she'll sleep from sheer weariness, and wake up hungry and refreshed to-morrow morning in the town,' said his wife rather impatiently; Alistair and her moods and whims did not please her.

The Major said no more; but he remembered Alistair's weakness for chocolates, and bought a large box, which he made Alistair promise to put under her pillow, and then the three of them went to bed. And Mrs Kerr proved to be a true prophet, for Alistair woke up the next morning looking very pale, and very dishevelled, it must be added, having refused the services of Mrs Kerr's maid, whom that lady sent to help her to dress and do her hair.

'Well, Alistair, here we are in the greatest city in the world. What do you think of it, eh? A wonderful place, isn't it?' inquired the Major cheerfully, as he greeted his niece affectionately the next morning, and stood with her in the corridor looking out on their approach to the great metropolis.

Now her greatest lovers cannot say that the approaches to London are attractive, even in early autumn. And it would have been wise of the Major not to have drawn Alistair's attention to them. As it was, he got the answer he might have expected.

'I think it's just awful, Uncle James, and I'll never be able to live here. Which of these is your home?' she inquired with a tone of disgust.

The Major took a hearty fit of laughter. 'Oh, we don't quite live in the slums, though we haven't such a fine home as Craigie, and I think you'll find yourself getting as fond of it as every one does who lives there.'

'I hope and pray not,' said Alistair, with a fervour which startled her uncle, who was much relieved to find that they had arrived and that the car was there; and standing on the platform with her aunt was Katherine, whom he greeted with boyish delight from the carriage window, turning immediately to say to Alistair, 'Look, Alistair, there's your cousin; she was so anxious to make your acquaintance that she has come to meet you.'

The eyes of the two girls met. Katherine gave one comprehensive glance at the tall, pale girl, with her mop of unbrushed red hair standing out round her head, and she looked anything but anxious to make her acquaintance. As for Alistair, one glance at Katherine's narrow skirt was enough. She turned her eyes away in disgust.

CHAPTER V.

'WHERE IS ALISTAIR?'

'COME along, come along; here's the car, and here we are back home again, Alistair.—Well, Katherine, it's quite a treat to see you again, looking so trim and fresh after—after'—the Major floundered for a moment, a glance at the faces round him showing him—obtuse man though he was—that he was what he called putting his foot in it. Then he wound up cheerfully—'after not seeing you for so long, and it's thanks to Alistair that we have come this week instead of next; she would not allow us to stop away from you—your last week of holidays.'

This wind-up did not please any one, except, perhaps, Alistair, who saw nothing extraordinary in being supposed to 'allow' her uncle and aunt to come home or stay away.

'I am very glad to see you and mamma back,' said Katherine with a smile; but she said nothing about being pleased to see Alistair, and fortunately the Major made no comment upon this omission, being occupied with something which seemed to him to be wrong with the car.

Alistair was staring out on to the streets as they passed rapidly through them, with set mouth and such an expression of misery on her face that

Miss Dolling, wishing to distract her thoughts, bent forward and said pleasantly, 'What do you think of London, Alistair?' Miss Dolling said this because it was the only thing she could think of to say, and was quite unprepared for the fierce look Alistair turned upon her.

'I think it's just the most awful place I ever could think of!' she said with decision.

'Oh, come, Alistair; it's not so bad as all that. What is there so awful in it, after all? These are some very fine streets we are passing through; and look, there is the Park to the left there; you will walk there sometimes,' said her uncle.

Alistair gave a contemptuous glance in the direction her uncle pointed, where, at the end of the street they were crossing, she could get a glimpse of trees through grimy railings.

'It's awful; so are the people.' Alistair shuddered. 'I never knew the English were such dreadful people! Oh, I cannot live among them and all these houses! I must go home, Uncle James—I must indeed. I cannot breathe this foul air; I will be ill—I will indeed!' she cried, clasping her hands and looking for all the world like a tragedy queen, as she leant forward and fixed piteous eyes on her uncle.

The Major looked very uncomfortable, for Alistair had spoken in rather a loud voice and attracted some attention, with her tragic airs and somewhat wild appearance.

Mrs Kerr, who was exasperated with them both, and very tired after her long journey, now felt that it was time to interfere, and said in her quiet, cold tones, 'Please be quiet, Alistair, and wait till we get home to settle your future plans.—James, who took off his hat to you just now?'

Mrs Kerr did not take the slightest interest in the Major's numerous acquaintances, but she was determined to monopolise his attention, and did so for the rest of the drive; while her sister, following her lead, kept up an animated conversation with Katherine upon a poet whose book of poems had just been published, and eagerly read by her niece.

Alistair sat there, her eyes fixed on the gray sky, and her white face without any expression in it.

It was a relief to every one when they arrived at No. 3 Down Square, and made their way into the dining-room, where breakfast was ready.

'Alistair will like to see her room. Shall I take her up to it?' said Miss Dolling when her sister and brother-in-law had seated themselves at the table, while Alistair stood stiff and miserable at the side of the room, with Katherine as far from her as possible.

The Major looked up, and was just going to suggest that she had better have some breakfast first; but at the sight of Alistair's face he checked himself, and it was Mrs Kerr who said, 'Thank

you, Amy; I think Alistair would be the better for a rest.'

'Will you come with me, Alistair?' said Miss Dolling kindly.

And Alistair, thankful to get away from these hateful relatives, turned and followed Miss Dolling—who, at least, was no relation at all, and had a kind, soft voice—out of the room and up the stairs to the pretty little room, with heather chintz, which Mrs Kerr had prepared for her.

It was too much for the homesick girl; all her self-restraint gave way, and she burst into uncontrollable sobs.

Miss Dolling waited a moment; then she took her with gentle force and put her upon the bed, and getting hot water and a sponge, bathed the girl's head till the sobs grew fainter and fainter, and she fell fast asleep. Then the kind lover of girls drew a rug over her, pulled the blinds down, and softly left the room.

'The wild Celt is sleeping peacefully in the bed of the hated southron,' she announced.

The Major laughed heartily; he was very fond of his sister-in-law, and enjoyed her sallies of wit.

Mrs Kerr was a complete contrast to her sister, who declared that she had no sense of humour. At all events, she was too irritated to laugh now, and observed coldly, 'I am glad to hear it; I hope she will wake up in a more rational state of mind. Tiresome child!'

'Poor child, I am awfully sorry for her; London is rather a hole after the Highlands. I wish I were back there, I know,' said the Major.

'Pray don't encourage Alistair in such ideas! Hole indeed!' exclaimed Mrs Kerr, who thought London the only town possible to live in.

'The girl looks very ill; I suppose it is the journey. She has more colour as a rule, I should imagine,' said Miss Dolling.

'Yes; but she has the delicate complexion that goes with hair of that colour, though she is not delicate; at least, I should not imagine so, judging by her Amazon feats,' replied Mrs Kerr, relating Alistair's long, barebacked ride to say good-bye, during which, it appeared, she had covered forty miles at least.

'Well, she is asleep now, and I should think she would sleep on till lunch-time; which is, as you say, the best thing she can do,' agreed Miss Dolling.

So Alistair was left sleeping peacefully upstairs, while the family downstairs talked over the events of the past fortnight, the Major at intervals giving indiscreet accounts of Alistair and her doings, which scandalised while they fascinated Katherine.

At lunch-time Miss Dolling crept softly to Alistair's bedside, but found by the girl's regular breathing that she was still asleep, and by common consent she was left alone while the others had lunch.

'She must be wakened this evening for her dinner, but if she likes to sleep, or pretend to be asleep, till then, so much the better,' declared Mrs Kerr when the maid came down at tea-time to say that Miss Comyns was still asleep.

However, when Alistair did not answer at seven o'clock in the evening, Mrs Kerr decided to go up herself; and—why he could not have told—the Major, feeling uneasy, followed his wife upstairs.

Mrs Kerr walked into the room, making some noise deliberately, and said, 'Alistair, wake up! Wake up, Alistair! Come and have some dinner!' Then, receiving no answer, she crossed the darkened room and approached the sleeping figure on the bed.

'You *must* wake up and eat, Alistair, or you will be ill, and I shall have to send for a doctor,' said Mrs Kerr firmly but not unkindly.

'Yes, Alistair, wake up, my dear,' said the Major, coming nearer still, and stretching out his hand to put it where he imagined, in the gloom, the girl's shoulder should be. Then he gave a sharp exclamation, and turned on the electric light over the head of the bed, which shone down upon—a tumbled rug that lay very much in the form of a human body on the bed, but covered no Alistair.

Mrs Kerr gave a swift glance round the room to assure herself that Alistair was not there, defying them both, as she had done at Craigie; but no

Alistair was to be seen. 'Tiresome girl!' ejaculated her much-bored aunt for about the sixth time that day.

'Where on earth is she?' demanded the Major.

'Oh, downstairs in one of the sitting-rooms, no doubt,' said his wife, turning to go down and dress for dinner. 'I suppose she felt hungry.'

The Major thought he might as well have a look in the likeliest rooms, and did so without success; so he sent for Katherine and said, 'I say, Katherine, just go and find your cousin; she's up, it appears, and I expect she is feeling very lonely. She has just lost her aunt, you know,' he said in an attempt to appeal to Katherine's sympathies.

'Where is she, papa?' inquired Katherine.

'In one of the sitting-rooms or somewhere,' said the Major vaguely.

Katherine went off as desired and looked in every room till she came to the second floor, on which was her mother's bedroom, where, after knocking, she went in, and said, 'Mamma, where is Alistair, please? Papa wants her.'

'In one of the sitting-rooms, I suppose,' said Mrs Kerr, fastening a bracelet on her arm.

'But I have looked in the dining-room and drawing-room and the morning-room—and papa's in his smokery—and in the schoolroom, and she is not in any of them,' objected Katherine. 'Where is she?'

Mrs Kerr left her bracelet unfastened as she

turned to face Katherine. 'I hope she is not on the roof—that seems to be her idea of a refuge,' she said, half in anger and half-anxiously; for the roof of a London house is not quite such a safe place to climb on to as a Highland one, though that has its dangers. There was the traffic below, which might distract Alistair's attention; to say nothing of the possibility of her attracting the attention of some passer-by, who might startle her by a shout. Besides—— Here a host of annoying results crowded into Mrs Kerr's mind, and she said, as she clasped her bracelet with a snap, 'Go and tell your father she is not in the house, and I think he had better see if she is on the roof.'

Down went Katherine with this message to the Major, who echoed, 'On the roof? I hope to heaven she is not! It's most dangerous! I shall forbid that! And how on earth am I to see if she is there? I can't climb about against the chimney-pots in my evening-clothes!' he added irritably. Even the Major's good temper was giving way under the trials Alistair caused it.

'Shall I ask George to go?' inquired Katherine. George was the under-footman and boot-boy.

'Yes—no; wait. I'll go myself; it won't do for this—this habit of Alistair's to get known,' said the Major as, putting on a mackintosh, he made his way up to the trap-door which led to the slates, followed by Katherine, whose feelings towards

her cousin did not become more friendly at all the trouble she was causing.

When the Major, grumbling to himself, had climbed the ladder and stood in the little loft leading to the roof, he tried to open the trap-door. 'It's bolted!' he cried in astonishment. 'How on earth did she do that?'

'She can't have gone out on the roof at all. Perhaps she has only gone out for a walk,' suggested Katherine.

'To be sure, just what she would do, and without asking leave or anything! Why on earth didn't we think of that before I made a fool of myself coming up here among these cobwebs and dust?' cried the Major as he cautiously made his way down again.

Mrs Kerr was relieved to hear that Alistair was not on the roof, but very much annoyed to hear that she had gone out without leave, which was a habit her aunt meant to forbid.

It was only when dinner was nearly over, and still Alistair did not appear, that her uncle and aunt began to be really alarmed, and the Major, who had been feeling rather uneasy, said suddenly, 'I say, Lettice, suppose she has gone back to Craigie!'

Mrs Kerr suppressed an impulse to say, 'Then let her stay there,' and observed, 'You had better see whether she has or not.'

So the Major, leaving his dessert untasted and his wine undrunk, got up and telephoned to Euston

and King's Cross, to find that she had not taken a ticket from either of those stations, and received messages assuring him that if she did he should be telephoned for directly, and the young lady detained till he came to fetch her.

'I dare say she is walking to the station; it would never occur to her to take a taxi, or even a cab. She used to walk everywhere at Craigie, and so she will only be in time for the night mail,' said the Major, as he finished his dinner in a calmer mood and sat down with his cigar to await the summons from Euston, which he and his wife, now that they remembered Alistair's remarks in the car coming home, were pretty sure was the destination Alistair had set out for.

Miss Dolling dropped in after dinner to see how they all were, she said; but, if the truth be known, to see Alistair, in whom she was much interested, and her first question, when she looked round and saw only Katherine with her sister and brother-in-law, was the question which they could none of them answer, 'Where is Alistair?'

'Gone off to Euston,' said the Major fretfully.

'Gone to Euston? Do you mean to say you have let her go back to Scotland—alone?' asked Miss Dolling.

'No, of course not. James means that Alistair has gone out without telling any one, and we feel pretty sure that she has gone to Euston to take a ticket home to Scotland,' explained his wife.

Miss Dolling was a very practical woman. She got a time-table and looked out the trains north. 'If we start at once we shall just get there before the next train starts, and can meet her and bring her back. I'll go with you if you will come, James. Let's take a taxi and go; the poor child will be bewildered in that dreadful crowd!' cried Miss Dolling.

The Major was only too glad to be encouraged to make a stir about his niece, and was soon ready to start.

CHAPTER VI.

WHERE ALISTAIR WAS.

MRS KERR settled herself down to the latest novel, repeating to herself her stock remark, 'Tiresome child!' and trying to assure herself that she was not in the least anxious about Alistair, who would presently come back with her indiscreet uncle, having been petted no doubt and fed with chocolates, because she would not eat proper food.

But half-an-hour passed, and then an hour, and still no Alistair nor her captors appeared. Mrs Kerr was getting anxious in spite of herself, for it was now past midnight; the last train had left for the north, and there was no telephone message from Major Kerr, which his wife felt was most inconsiderate of him and her sister.

At last Mrs Kerr, who had moved her seat near the window, heard the throbbing of a taxi at the door, and shortly after Major Kerr and Miss Dolling, both looking tired and worried, came in.

'Where is Alistair?' inquired Mrs Kerr, when she saw that the girl was not with them.

'We can't find her,' said her husband as he threw himself into a chair and bent his head on his hand in an attitude of dejection.

'She has not gone north, for we have seen the trains go out at two stations, and had the possible

stations watched; and now we have been to Scotland Yard and put detectives on her track,' explained Miss Dolling, who looked as worried as her brother-in-law.

'She is not in the hospitals or mortuaries or police-stations so far,' said Major Kerr gloomily.

'Of course not,' replied his wife sharply, rejecting these unpleasant possibilities, which it was just like her husband to suggest when they were all worn-out and anxious.

'Then where is she?' inquired Miss Dolling.

'How should I know? Tiresome child! When we do find her she should be severely punished,' began Mrs Kerr.

But her husband interrupted quite sternly for him. 'When we do find her it will be time enough to talk of what we are to do. At present, when that poor child is wandering about London, or drowned in the Thames, for all we know to the contrary, it is not the time to talk of punishing her. Poor child! poor child! what will her mother say?'

'I don't believe she has come to any harm, James. She is far too sensible and healthy-minded to do anything morbid,' declared Miss Dolling, who had heard of Alistair's Bible knowledge, and felt sure that no one brought up on that Book would do anything really wrong.

'Then I suppose the only thing we can do is to go to bed and wait for news till the morning,' said

Mrs Kerr, rising as she spoke.—'You had better stop here to-night, Amy.'

'Yes. I have telephoned home to say I should not be returning,' said Miss Dolling. She was on excellent terms with her married sister. Indeed, she had more influence with her than any one in the world, and was devoted to her, though she saw her faults, and at this moment disapproved strongly of her treatment of Alistair and her escapade.

'You had better go to bed, Lettice; you must be tired. I shall sit up near the telephone in case of news,' said the Major.

'You will let me know if there is any, James? I am used to girls, and should like to go to Alistair if she is found,' said his sister-in-law.

'Thank you; I will,' said the Major.

'Of course she will be found,' said Mrs Kerr as she went upstairs with her sister, whom she showed into a spare room.

The Major took himself to his smokery, and sat down in a large easy-chair, which he drew up close to the telephone, and prepared for his night watch by laying his head back, shutting his eyes, and going fast asleep.

Rap-a-tap-tap! The Major started awake and instinctively clutched the receiver. 'Hallo! who's that?'

'I beg your pardon, sir. I didn't know you was up,' said the voice of the butler at the door.

'All right, Symons. Wait a moment; I'm rung

up,' said the Major, still holding on to the telephone.

'There's been no telephone-call, sir; at least, I heard none. I think I woke you knocking at the door,' said the butler.

'No telephone-call!' repeated the Major. 'Then where is she?'

'If you mean Miss Comyns, sir, I expect she've gone home and will write to-morrow,' said the old butler, who had been in the service of the Major for many years, and loved him, as did all his dependants, and indeed most people who knew him.

'But that's just what she hasn't, Symons.'

'Perhaps she's gone on foot, sir,' suggested Symons.

'I never thought of that; the very thing she would do. I must telephone to Scotland Yard!' cried the Major.

Symons went away, and returned in a very short space of time with a delicious cup of coffee and hot rolls.

The Major drank it down, ate the rolls-and-butter, and his spirits rose rapidly.

'We'll have the roads searched; she can't have gone far, and we'll have her back before your mistress is up,' said the Major cheerfully.

But things did not happen quite so comfortably, and the day passed with no news of Alistair. A very dreary day it was. Katherine walked about, looking very grave; her conscience was uneasy.

She remembered the contemptuous look with which she had greeted her cousin, whose black dress and wan face should have won Katherine's sympathy, however rough and untidy her hair.

The Major spent his time between the telephone and Scotland Yard, where he worried every official who would allow himself to be worried. Mrs Kerr worried herself into a bad headache, and the only one who was calm, and declared that Alistair was safe somewhere, was Miss Dolling.

This was their one consolation. Miss Dolling, though young, was the head of one of the best girls' schools in England, and a great authority upon education, and therefore upon girls, and she declared that no one looking at Alistair could help seeing that, in spite of this bad behaviour, she had plenty of common-sense. And Miss Dolling kept to this optimistic view for the miserable two days which followed, during which they debated as to whether her parents should be told, and decided, by Miss Dolling's advice, not to tell them.

On the evening of the third day came a telegram from old Donald: 'Miss Alistair arrived here.'

The Major's wrath knew no bounds. 'She may stay there, then. We've been to fetch her once, at great personal inconvenience, and this is the thanks we get. I shall write and tell her mother about it, and say I can't have Lettice worried like this. It's made her quite ill; and as for me, I should

think I've lost a stone in weight with the worry and anxiety of these last days!' he burst out.

'What do you propose that she should do up there all alone?' inquired Miss Dolling.

'I don't propose anything; her parents will have to do that. They left her to be badly brought up by that aunt of hers—not that I wish to speak against the dead, God forbid!—but really the whole thing has upset me dreadfully,' said the Major; his wrath evaporating, however, after he had given vent to his feelings a little.

'I should write to your sister and tell her the whole tale, in the first place,' said Mrs Kerr.

'Wait till to-morrow, at any rate,' said Miss Dolling; 'and in the meantime I should have Alistair's room prepared for her in case she wished to return.'

Mrs Kerr opened her mouth to speak, but checked herself, and gave orders for Miss Comyns's room to be prepared.

Half-an-hour afterwards the housekeeper came to Mrs Kerr's room with a note in her hand. 'The housemaid found this on the bed inside the rug, ma'am,' she said.

It was a note from Alistair without any beginning:

'I am obliged to you for your hospitality, but I cannot live in London, and have gone back to Craigie, where I will write and let you know of my safe arrival.'

Mrs Kerr carried the note to her husband, who,

after inveighing against the carelessness of the housemaids in leaving Alistair's room untouched, veered round and was inclined to take Alistair's part.

'You see, she was not so thoughtless and inconsiderate as we imagined, after all,' said the Major, much relieved at the discovery of the note and Alistair's explanation, which, though it did not exonerate her, made her conduct more excusable.

Mrs Kerr, too, was appeased by the note, and it was decided that they should wait a day and see whether time would bring Alistair to a more reasonable frame of mind; and in the meantime the Major telegraphed the story to the West Indies, without any comment whatever.

'They can do as they like now. I shall not go up and fetch Alistair a second time; but if they write and ask us to take her after all, and if Alistair writes and apologises and promises to behave herself, we'll think about having her back,' announced the Major at dinner that night.

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when the butler, who had been called out of the room, came back and said, 'Miss Comyns, sir, is in the hall.'

The party looked up startled, and there at the door, having followed the butler into the room, stood the ghost of the fresh-faced girl whom her uncle and aunt had fetched from the Highlands.

Symons discreetly withdrew with the under-foot-

man, as Alistair advanced and said in her soft Scotch tones, 'I am sorry I ran away, Uncle James and Aunt Lettice. I did very wrong; please forgive me.'

Katherine, who was allowed to dine with her father and mother during the holidays when they were alone, looked down on her plate. She could not have done what Alistair had done; nor could she have apologised so frankly.

Every one was taken by surprise except Miss Dolling, who smiled encouragingly at the newcomer.

Major Kerr started from his seat—the first surprise over—and putting his arms round Alistair, said, as he kissed her, 'Of course we will—of course we will. Go and kiss your aunt, Alistair, and come and have some dinner.'

Alistair let herself be drawn towards her aunt, who kissed her kindly, as did Katherine; she then said, 'I am not hungry, thank you, Uncle James, and I would like to go to bed. I have not been in a bed for three nights.'

'To be sure, you must be dead-tired. How on earth did you get home—to Craigie, I mean—and how did you get back so quickly?' asked her uncle.

'I went back with Georgie M'Alister's boat, and Donald brought me here to-day,' said Alistair.

'Went back by boat! That accounts for it!' cried the Major; but here his wife interposed.

'Alistair is too tired to tell us any more to-night, James.—Come with me, Alistair. I will take you to your room.'

The Major was surprised, but said nothing, fortunately. Miss Dolling was secretly very pleased, and Katherine was relieved at her cousin's departure.

The Major gave orders for Donald to be well fed and housed in the servants' quarters, and after dinner had the old man into his smokery to talk to him.

'The poor bairn arrived more dead than alive; but Jeanie was sore displeased with her, and told her she must come awa' south with me at once. She would not even let her stop a night to rest,' Donald explained.

'Not allow Alistair? I thought it was Alistair who ruled you all up north?' the Major could not help saying.

'It's what is *right* that rules Miss Alistair, asking your pardon, Major; and if you'll only point out to our missie what is right, and tell her what the Lord would have her do, you'll have no trouble with her, for she'll never do wrong wilfully; and if she does, she'll repent it sair, as she has this business.'

'I see,' said the Major thoughtfully. 'Well, Donald, since you are here, you must stay a bit, till Alistair gets used to us, and then I think you'd better send for Jeanie.'

'Asking your pardon again, Major, Jeanie willna come; she says her duty is to her parents, and that Miss Alistair is to stay peaceably with you.'

'Jeanie's a fine woman,' said the Major.

'She does her duty,' was Donald's qualified praise.

However, he stayed a few days, and the Major made much of him, and took him and Alistair to see the sights of London, and managed to give them a run in the country in his car, so that Alistair might breathe fresh air for an hour or so daily.

Donald was much interested in all he saw, and though he secretly agreed with Alistair that it was an 'awfu' place,' and that there were far too many people and houses for one to breathe freely, he said no such thing, but declared they were grand sights he saw, especially the Zoo and the Museum, where, he said, Alistair might get fine learning.

Alistair retired into her shell after the first evening and her apology, but showed no signs of revolt, and never attempted to climb on the roof or to go out of the house unattended.

She and Katherine seemed to have nothing in common; at least, they never said a word to each other when they were left alone.

'I don't understand her, Aunt Amy,' said Katherine when Miss Dolling asked her about her cousin. 'She doesn't seem to care about anything I care

for, and if I speak to her she just answers "Yes" or "No;" but she never begins a conversation.'

Miss Dolling said no more; but she had a conversation with Alistair herself—a long conversation, upon many subjects, the result of which will be seen in the next chapter.

CHAPTER VII.

'THE GIRLS' ETON.'

'LETTICE, that child cannot breathe in London!' Mrs Kerr was sitting in her morning-room doing the household accounts (for she was a very excellent mistress in spite of her fashionable appearance and love of pleasure), when her sister Amy came in and made the above announcement.

'Dear me, Amy, has she begun that again? I thought her good behaviour was too good to last!' ejaculated Mrs Kerr.

'Her good behaviour was too bad to last, because it simply meant that she is ill, and will get worse if she stays here,' said Miss Dolling.

'What do you propose, then? That we leave town and go and live in the country?' inquired Mrs Kerr, whom this plan would not have suited at all.

'No; I propose that you give her to me. She is just the kind of girl I like to have at Nun's Eaton,' said Miss Dolling.

Mrs Kerr's face brightened. 'By all means! An excellent idea! Katherine is dreadfully bored by her, and as they don't get on there is no advantage in her staying here. But have you a vacancy? This is very short notice for you,' said her sister.

Miss Dolling's was a very popular school. It had been called 'The Girls' Eton,' not only because of its name, but because it was said to be to girls what Eton is to boys, and because the sisters of many Eton boys went there. It was very difficult to get a girl into the school unless she was quite small. Miss Dolling did not care for girls of fourteen, and as school opened in two days, and Mrs Kerr had seen that every vacancy was filled, she wondered how room was to be found for Alistair.

'I shall find room,' said Miss Dolling; and as she was very autocratic, Mrs Kerr knew that if she said so, so it would be. Then a sudden thought occurred to her.

'I suppose she will not object?' she said suddenly.

Miss Dolling smiled in a superior manner. 'I think not. In any case, I should take no notice of any objection; but if you like I will broach the subject to her, if you and James agree.'

'James will be only too thankful. He is devoting himself entirely to that girl, taking her drives in the country to give her fresh air. It will be a relief to all our minds if you take her in hand,' said Mrs Kerr.

Miss Dolling was very busy, as may be imagined. It was, as a matter of fact, a very unusual thing for her to be in town during the last days of the summer holidays, and she was really staying because of Alistair.

For Amy Dolling was a real lover of girls. They were her one passion, and to make them happy and mould them into good and capable women was her aim in life. So when she saw Alistair—whose frank apology had won her heart—with her white face, using all the force of self-control she possessed to endure this life, she determined to help the girl.

To Alistair she went straight upon leaving her sister. 'Alistair,' she said, 'come and see some photographs of my school;' and she took Alistair to her mother's flat, and showed her Nun's Eaton and its beautiful grounds and cricket-field and gymnasium, and told her about it.

Alistair drew a long breath. 'How lovely! How happy your girls will be!' she said.

'I think they are. I hope so. I should like to have you as an Eatonite. Would you come?'

'Would I not! But my duty is here,' said Alistair.

'I think not. I have not asked your uncle yet, but I feel sure he would let you come,' said Miss Dolling, noticing with satisfaction that already Alistair's face had brightened.

And so it was decided. But now a curious thing happened. As Alistair cheered up, Katherine became depressed, and, stranger still, avoided the aunt of whom she had been so fond.

Miss Dolling was at a loss to account for her behaviour. It could not be jealousy of Alistair, for Katherine knew that her aunt had asked that

she might go to Nun's Eaton years ago, only to be refused. As, however, her avoidance became more marked, Miss Dolling, who always went straight to the point, taxed her niece with her strange behaviour.

Katherine raised her clear, candid eyes to her aunt. 'I am sorry if I have been rude, Aunt Amy; I suppose I thought you were too much occupied with Alistair to pay any attention to what I did,' she said.

'That is nonsense and unworthy of you, Katherine, and it does not explain your melancholy face. As you can have no particular affection for your cousin and did not particularly want her to come, I don't suppose it is her departure that is causing this dejection,' said Miss Dolling.

'But it is,' was Katherine's unexpected remark; then, seeing her aunt's surprised face, she continued: 'I mean, I should like to have companions, and this last day since she has began to talk I have wished I knew more of her. And now I shall be all alone.'

Miss Dolling said nothing. She had never approved of the way Katherine was being educated by masters and endless governesses, without companionship of her own age, except when a friend was invited to tea. But it was too late now; at least, she thought so. Katherine was nearly sixteen, and even if her parents consented, Miss Dolling did not know whether she would be happy at school. As

usual, Miss Dolling asked a direct question: 'Do you mean that you would like Alistair to stop with you? Because that is impossible now, and would not be kind of you. Or do you mean that you would like to come to Nun's Eaton?'

Katherine's face spoke for her before she said, 'I'd love it, if mamma would let me!' If mamma allowed it, Katherine knew that her father would agree, as he did to most of his wife's wishes.

'You had better ask her, and if she agrees, of course I will find a place for you,' said Miss Dolling.

This time Mrs Kerr was not so pleased. She did not want to part with her idolised daughter, who was her only child.

'As she wishes it, I may say, Lettice, that I think a couple of years at a public school will be the making of her. She is a dear girl, and has a fine character; but she is a prig, and she dreams too much over her rubbishy poetry,' said Miss Dolling in her downright way.

Mrs Kerr allowed Miss Dolling to say to her what she would not have stood from any one else; but this offended her rather, and she said coldly, 'I should not call Katherine a prig, and I think her poetry very pretty; but as she wishes to go to school I will not thwart her, and it will be very nice for Alistair to have Katherine to tell her how to behave.'

Miss Dolling made no comment on this view of

the case; she was not sure that she would not have preferred to have Alistair alone.

Alistair fortunately was not of this opinion. 'I will be very glad to have some one I know, for I will be feeling very strange among all those unknown lassies,' she said; and Katherine was pleased at this, and the two became quite friendly.

Miss Dolling went off that day, and the two girls were to follow at the end of the week, as soon as suitable clothes had been bought for Alistair and a few necessary additions made to Katherine's outfit.

Donald had gone back to Craigie quite easy in his mind about Alistair. 'She is among kind, good folk and behaving like a leddy,' he told Jeanie. Alistair saw him off quite calmly, having laden him with presents for every one on the estate, for which extravagance her uncle supplied the funds, considering himself repaid by the enjoyment of his niece and the amusement her choice of gifts caused him.

The last days in town were spent in trying on at the dressmaker's and in shopping, which, now that it was 'only clothes and things for herself,' bored Alistair, and made her look so pale and tired that her aunt was glad to leave her at home sometimes and take only Katherine to choose what was necessary for them both.

So Alistair was left at home, or rather, to be correct, at Major Kerr's house, and stood looking

out of the window with eyes that grew solemn as she watched the passers-by, till slowly two big tears welled up into her eyes and rolled down her cheeks.

She turned, without wiping them away, at the sound of an opening door, expecting to see Katherine, for this was the schoolroom—the girls' joint sitting-room; but it was her uncle who came in.

He was, as his wife said, going considerably out of his way to make Alistair happy, and his consternation at seeing her in tears was great. 'What! crying, Alistair? What is the matter now, my dear? I thought you were going to be so happy at Nun's Eaton?' he exclaimed.

'So I hope I will be, Uncle James. I'm not crying for myself; it's for those poor people passing by,' replied Alistair.

Major Kerr, who had joined her at the window, looked down in the direction she pointed to see what poor people were exciting her compassion. He searched up and down the square for any one worthy or unworthy (as the case might be) of compassion, but saw no one but a decently dressed artisan and a young workgirl dressed in an attempt at the fashion, each intent on business; the rest were well-dressed people. 'What poor people do you mean?' he inquired.

'That poor, weakly man and that dreadful-looking girl,' she replied.

'H'm! Well, he is rather undersized and pale;

that 's London—three generations deteriorate them. But what 's the matter with the girl? She looks well enough.'

'What! in those dreadful clothes and that horrid hat, that it 's a shame for any woman to put on her head?' burst out Alistair passionately.

Major Kerr looked at his niece anxiously. 'Is that what you were crying for? But, I say, Alistair, you mustn't take all the cares of the world on your shoulders like that! And, you know, you 'd better not talk like that at school. The girls are rather fashionable, and though I don't pretend to like the fashions myself—in fact, I can't understand sensible women wearing such extraordinary things as they do, just because it is the fashion—still, women have always puffed themselves out or pinched themselves in to be in the fashion, and they always will do so; and I advise you to leave them alone, and certainly not to cry over it.'

'But, Uncle James, look at the peasants at Craigie; they take no notice of the fashions,' objected Alistair.

'No; for a wonder the fashions have not got to Craigie, but they soon will. Anyway, as you are in the world, you must put up with it and not try to reform it.'

'Oh, I never thought of such a thing; only it makes me sad, and so do these poor people; there 's never a happy face among them. It 's just awful!'

The Major watched for a minute or two the passers-by, of whom there were a good many, for this square was a thoroughfare between two busy streets. It was true that there was a strained look on most of the faces and never a smile among them, and some very unpleasing types passed by. 'Well,' he said at last, 'we Londoners don't go about with our hearts on our sleeves, but we've got them all the same, and when you have to keep an eye on the traffic half the time you can't go about smiling. But we're not so miserable as we look. Don't you be in too great a hurry to judge, Alistair.'

With this parting advice, Major Kerr, who had just seen his wife and Katherine drive up in the car, left to greet them, and to impart to his wife his opinion that Miss Dolling would not find Alistair quite so easy to manage as she seemed to think.

'She will be the first girl Amy has not managed, then,' said Mrs Kerr, who had unbounded faith in her sister's power over girls. 'I must confess that I do not understand Alistair—first a savage, and then meek and mild as water!'

'She's a dark horse, but she's thoroughbred, and she has good stuff in her,' declared the Major, who did not understand Alistair either, but who liked her in spite of that, and admired her courage in coming back as she did.

The next day Alistair and Katherine motored

down to Nun's Eaton, and were met at the front-door by Miss Dolling, who stood, a picturesque figure, just inside the big porch, with her big St Bernard beside her.

She greeted both girls with a kiss, and brought them into the marble hall, where a cheery fire blazed, and rugs and skins carpeted the floor, and tea was ready in the middle of the hall.

Here they found a good many ladies waiting for the tea, which had just arrived, and with them the Major and Mrs Kerr shook hands. They were the mistresses, or, rather, some of them, who took tea in the hall with the Head-mistress and any guests she might have.

This was Katherine and Alistair's introduction to the famous girls' school called 'The Girls' Eton.'

CHAPTER VIII.

NEW GIRLS.

'IT'S a fine place,' said Alistair, looking round her and drawing a long breath.

She was apparently addressing Miss Dolling, at which the assembled mistresses looked a little surprised, for the girls, new girls especially, were wont to be afraid of Miss Dolling; besides which, it was not etiquette to speak to the Head-mistress unless she spoke to you first. Still, the fact of the new girl's taking tea with them, instead of going straight to her House and having it with her House-mistress, was exceptional, and they concluded that she, as well as Katherine, was a relative of Miss Dolling's.

The Head-mistress turned pleasantly to Alistair. 'Can you breathe here, Alistair?' she inquired.

'I can; but it's not so fine as Craigie, though it's better than London,' she announced.

The Major laughed cheerily. It was the first time Alistair had mentioned Craigie, and it showed that she was getting resigned and that her home-sickness was bearable now. 'No, it's not Highland air; but Nun's Eaton stands on high land, and you get the breeze direct from the North Sea.—Don't you, Amy?'

'Yes, we have a very healthy position; I chose it

for that,' replied Miss Dolling, who seemed somehow to be a different Miss Dolling from the kind and indulgent Aunt Amy, who was in and out of the Kerrs' house in a friendly, unconventional way, and yet she was quite simple and gave herself no airs.

Major and Mrs Kerr only stopped to have a cup of tea and a walk round the park; for Nun's Eaton was an old country-house that had belonged to a nobleman who had entertained royalty, and who carried off the bed in which Queen Elizabeth slept, when entertained by his ancestors, to his new house.

In the park, which sloped up to woodlands on the side of the hill on which the house was built, were lovely tennis-lawns shaded by trees, a fine cricket-ground, practice-grounds, a lake with islands, a river running at the bottom of the grounds, and, finally, Miss Dolling's pride and joy, a beautiful garden with a hedge of glorious roses woven over.

It was, indeed, an ideal place for a school, as the Major said every time he visited his sister-in-law, and now repeated for the hundredth time.

Alistair stood and shaded her eyes as she looked up towards the woods. 'Will that be a wood-pigeon on yon tree, Uncle James?' she asked.

'I see no bird, Alistair. What tree are you looking at?' inquired her uncle, looking in the direction his niece was pointing, where only two little trees near stood in her line of vision.

'In yon wood,' said Alistair. 'Yes, I think by their flight they are wood-pigeons—three of them.'

'Oh, those specks in the sky! You mustn't expect us to have your Highland eyes, Alistair; we are not trained to see birds sitting on trees miles off,' he replied.

Miss Dolling turned round, much interested. 'That was a long way to see and distinguish a bird; I wonder, is the training alone responsible for that?' she remarked thoughtfully. No doubt she was considering whether it would be possible and advantageous to train the eyes of her girls to see into the far distance as Alistair did. Miss Dolling believed it possible to develop girls far more than had ever been done.

'I can't say; I only know that any Highlander I've ever been out with can see my game long before I can discern anything,' observed the Major.

Alistair was so occupied with the nature round her that she took little notice of her companions. She did not seem to be in the least nervous at the thought of beginning school-life, and it was the self-reliant Katherine who kept close to her mother, and was half-inclined to repent of her resolution to come to Nun's Eaton, and who bade a tearful farewell to her mother and father.

'Now, girls, I will take you to Lorne House,' said Miss Dolling when the car had disappeared in a cloud of dust, at which Alistair looked disapprovingly, having imbibed her aunt Alistair's

prejudices against this noisy intruder upon their quiet moors.

Katherine's eyes were wet with a moisture she wiped away furtively as she followed her aunt to Lorne House.

'Is that the name of the house I'll dwell in?' cried Alistair, her eyes shining with delight.

'Yes. Oh, to be sure, it is named after a countryman of yours. Well, since it pleases you, I am glad you happen to be going to Miss Caruthers's House. Two sisters have been prevented from returning by illness, and you are taking their place,' explained Miss Dolling as she walked across the lawn to a pretty villa a little higher up the hill, which was one of the school-houses she had built for overflowing boarders.

Miss Caruthers met them in the hall. She had seen Miss Dolling coming, and came to receive her. All her mistresses paid her this kind of court.

'Here are two new boarders for you, Miss Caruthers—Katherine Kerr and Alistair Comyns, neither of whom has ever been to school before, so they will want a great deal of teaching,' said Miss Dolling; and so saying, she dismissed the girls with a nod, and began a conversation with Miss Caruthers about some school business, leading the way as she talked into the drawing-room, into which she entered with the House-mistress, who shut the door after her.

The two new girls were left in the hall, and

Katherine looked at Alistair; but Alistair was looking out over the park to the woods. 'Let's go for a run in the woods,' she observed.

'I don't think we'd better without asking leave, and there's no one to ask,' said Katherine, hesitating.

'What should we ask leave to go into the garden for?' inquired Alistair, staring in admiration at the large parks and woods round her with eyes very blue, now that she could breathe and live again.

But before Katherine could be persuaded to take this liberty a maid appeared, and requested the two girls to follow her and unpack their luggage, which had arrived by train.

They were a week late for school, it will be remembered, so there were no other new girls, and these two were alone in the packing-room, which had lockers all round for things that could not be taken into the cubicle upstairs.

Katherine handed her keys to the maid, who undid her box, while Alistair unlocked her own and proceeded to take out what was necessary, according to the maid's instructions. She was so busy looking at the linen, which seemed to smell of the heather, that she did not notice what Katherine was doing, nor that the maid had left the room when her pile was ready to carry up to her cubicle. She looked round for some one to tell her where to take it, and then saw that

Katherine was sitting on her boxes, apparently doing nothing.

'Haven't you unpacked?' she asked in astonishment.

'No; I am waiting for the maid to come and do it,' replied Katherine.

Just at that moment the maid returned, and said, 'If you have unpacked, young ladies, I will show you where to put your clothes. Oh, you are not ready, miss; then if you will come we will go upstairs to the Green Dormitory, and return for you later,' said the maid, addressing first one and then the other of the girls, and she had left the room with Alistair before Katherine had time to request the maid to unpack for her.

Katherine stood for a few moments looking after them; one of her dreamy moods had come on, and she would have liked to sit down and write a poem upon this new and strange life into which she had been plunged; but in a moment, as it seemed, the maid and Alistair were back, and the former said hastily, 'You had better make haste, miss; the other young ladies will be in directly, and they won't like to find boxes all over the floor when they want to take off their skirts and their boots.'

Katherine woke up from her dream, and set to work slowly to unpack.

'Let me help you, Kathy,' said Alistair, as she knelt beside her cousin and took out the top layer.

Katherine was surprised at this new name, and at the change in Alistair, who did not seem like the same girl; but she felt warmed by the affectionate tone and accepted her help gladly, for Katherine was not in the habit of doing anything for herself, and she began to think that she had been very foolish in coming here and leaving her maid behind. It had not occurred to her that a maid would not be provided for her; in fact, she decided to ask her aunt what arrangement was going to be made for her. In the meantime, as this maid-servant did not know her duties, she thought it best to do as she was told, and unpack her own box. This she did, with Alistair's help.

They had just finished, and the boxes had been relocked and carried away by a man, when about a dozen girls, chattering and laughing, came rushing in.

They were all dressed in dark-blue serge sailor blouses and short skirts, and wore bright yellow ties and waistbands. At sight of Katherine and Alistair—who had just been shown the lockers for them with their names on, and were preparing to leave the packing and cloak room—they stopped short.

The two foremost—handsome, healthy-looking English girls, with boyish manners and walk—came forward, and one said, 'How do you do? You are the two new girls who have come to take the Newmans' places?'

'Yes; and a beastly bore it is losing them,' began the second.

The others, who had all come in now, were rather shocked at this tactless speech, and one said, 'Draw it mild, Alice; that's not a very civil welcome to give new girls.'

'Yes; and one's Miss Dolling's niece, so you'd better look out what you are about,' said another in an undertone.

'Alice means that it is a bore losing them this term, because of the games; they were awfully good at hockey and lacrosse, and we were nearly sure of winning the cup this year, because Lorne had the best House-team in the school,' explained the eldest girl, named Davidine, who seemed the leader; and who added, 'But perhaps you play well too? What school were you at? Are you sisters?' She looked from one to the other doubtfully, for they were very unlike, and yet they stood close together, and had come together. Alistair, in spite of being more than two years younger, was the taller; but Katherine looked, not exactly older, but more self-possessed.

It was Katherine who answered. 'We are cousins, not sisters, and we have not been to school before; so I am afraid we shall not be much use for your games. I only play tennis.'

There was an involuntary chorus of 'Oh's!' at this; for not to play games proclaimed your inferiority.

'I don't play tennis, but I can play hockey, if you want me to,' put in Alistair.

'Oh, of course; you are Scotch,' said the tactless Alice, detecting the accent. 'What part do you come from?'

'I come from Craigie—Alistair Comyns of Craigie,' said Alistair, turning simply to the questioner.

'Comyns of Craigie!' exclaimed another girl. 'What a pretty name!'

'Any relation to the murderous Red Comyns?' inquired Alice.

But the first speaker, who was the head of the House, noting that Alistair flushed at the joking remark, turned the conversation, and said, 'How nice that you can play hockey! We must try you and see if you can be in this team.'

'Put a new girl in the team!' cried Alice.

'Any girl I put in will be in the team,' said the head of her House; 'but at present no arrangements have been made. When they are, it will be time enough to make comments, Alice.'

'In the meantime, Miss Caruthers has sent me to take the new girls to get ready for supper,' said a girl at the back.

This caused a hastening of their movements among the girls, who rushed upstairs to change into semi-evening frocks, and they all went into the dining-hall, where tables, prettily decked with flowers, were laid for supper.

Miss Caruthers was very artistic in her tastes—

the dining-room was a very pretty room. Katherine looked around approvingly; the supper was daintily served, and was very good, and Miss Caruthers herself, who now came in, was very prettily dressed, not quite in evening-dress, but looking very nice and lady-like.

Katherine—perhaps because she was a new girl, or perhaps because she was Miss Dolling's niece—was placed at her left hand; the mathematical mistress was at her right. Alistair was beside the lady-housekeeper, at whose right sat the head-girl of Lorne.

Here Katherine made her second mistake at school, over which she shed so many tears that it must be related in a new chapter.

CHAPTER IX.

AN EXTRAORDINARY SUPPER.

TO sit beside Miss Caruthers was always a mixed pleasure to the girls; the honour was great, but the difficulty of talking to her was greater. 'She always seems to be looking at something miles away and thinking of something in the next county,' one of her House-girls once said; and to-night was no exception to the rule. She smiled in a dreamy way at Katherine, and asked if the latter had unpacked and managed to find a place in her cubicle for all her belongings; but she did not seem to hear Katherine's answer to the effect that she had *not* most emphatically.

The mathematical mistress looked across at Katherine and said, 'It is a matter of precision.'

'Yes, just so,' agreed Miss Caruthers; but Katherine wondered whether she had heard what Miss Lawes, the mathematical mistress, said, and also what the remark meant.

After this, conversation at their end of the table languished.

Presently Miss Lawes suddenly looked across at Katherine, paused a moment, and said, 'Allow me, Miss Caruthers,' and changed the House-mistress's plate.

There was dead silence for another moment, and

then some low-toned conversation, and Katherine, who had that sensitive nature which people call the artistic temperament, felt that some disagreable subject was being discussed, and that somehow it was connected with her.

'Will you have some more?' asked the girl next her in rather snappish tones.

'No, thank you,' said Katherine, whose appetite, if she had any, was quite taken away by the tone of the speaker.

Whereupon her next neighbour, who happened to be Alice, got up, seized her plate (very roughly, as Katherine thought), and banged down another in its place.

This time there was no mistaking the intentional rudeness, and Katherine raised her grave eyes in surprise at Alice.

'Gently, Alice,' said Miss Caruthers, whom the clatter of plates had apparently brought back from the next county.

Miss Eagen, the lady-housekeeper, was the very opposite of her friend Miss Caruthers, being lively and talkative, and she now stepped into the breach and began to talk to the head-girl of the House, and to include Alistair in her conversation.

It was a very long table, and it was not possible to hear what was going on at the other end, but it was evident that they were enjoying themselves, and by degrees the conversation became general, and people seemed more good-tempered, Katherine

decided. She even tried to make a few remarks to Alice, who, however, gave her such snappish answers that she subsided into silence, and decided that they had very extraordinary manners at Nun's Eaton, and that she should tell Aunt Amy so.

Altogether it was a very uncomfortable meal, and the fact that Alistair's voice could be heard now and then raised, and that the Scotch accents were easily distinguishable, added to her annoyance. Katherine looked frowningly down at Alistair, but the disapproving look was quite lost upon her cousin, who was looking at Miss Eagen, to whom she was evidently telling some tale which amused her hearers immensely.

'Alistair,' said Katherine; but she was too shy to say it very loud, and Alistair never heard or heeded the warning.

Miss Caruthers had apparently wandered into the next county again, and did not seem to notice that there was more laughter than usual. Katherine grew hotter and hotter; she felt certain that they were all laughing at Alistair, and that the latter was making a spectacle of herself.

Miss Lawes saw Katherine's distress at what she thought was bad behaviour on the part of her cousin, and kindly bent forward to ask her whether she 'liked country pursuits and went in for botany or natural history.'

'I have read a good deal about natural history, and I have studied it in the Natural History

Museum in London; but I have not been much in the real country. We go to the sea or abroad in my holidays,' replied Katherine.

'Ah, then, you can talk foreign languages. Where have you been—to France, I suppose?' inquired Miss Lawes, who could talk when a subject was provided for her.

'Yes, to France and Germany and Italy,' replied Katherine carelessly.

'Then you can chatter in three foreign languages?' observed Miss Lawes, who, like the rest of the staff at Nun's Eaton, was inclined to think very little of such an accomplishment, considering it easy to be added where a good grammatical foundation was laid.

Katherine felt the implied scorn of her linguistic talents, and replied with a little pride, 'I hope I don't chatter. Naturally I talked the language of the country I was in, and with my foreign teachers, as I suppose they do here.'

'As a matter of fact the French and German mistresses here are English,' observed Miss Lawes.

Katherine opened her eyes wide, and looked incredulously and, as the other girls chose to think, impertinently at Miss Lawes. 'Then how can they be French and German teachers?' inquired Katherine, who had not yet learned that it was etiquette to call the staff 'mistresses' and the classes 'forms,' and who thereby gave great offence.

'Quite well, thank you,' put in Alice. 'At any

rate, they teach quite well enough for us, and I dare say you will find that we know a great deal more than you, though you may be able to talk them.'

'I wonder if that is true. Do you know, for instance, the rules about the subjunctive, and when it is followed by a negative?' Katherine got no further.

There was a gasp at this audacious questioning by a new girl, and on a subject tabooed at meals, where it was not etiquette to talk 'shop,' as lessons were called.

Katherine saw that her essays at conversation were not so successful as Alistair's, and said no more. Whether the girls would have said more is doubtful, for here a diversion was caused at the other end of the table.

There was some eager conversation, and the girls seemed to be craning their necks to see something that Alistair was doing with knives and forks on the table; but what it was Katherine could not see, because, as has been said, the heads of the girls near her intervened.

Then she heard Alistair in excited tones say something, push back her chair, sweep a table-cloth and, incidentally, some bread and a knife off a small side-table which stood against the wall, and before any one had grasped what she was going to do, jump upon it, and whistling a tune, begin a wild hornpipe, as Katherine

imagined in horror, with one arm over her head and the other on her hip, as she danced and stamped upon the little table, which, being artistic rather than solid, began to shake and give ominous creaks and cracks.

There was a moment of paralysed amazement as the girls looked, half-fascinated by Alistair's lithe and wild movements and turns as she gave a yell or Highland cry, and danced more madly than ever.

The girls, recovering from their first astonishment, turned to look at Miss Caruthers. Miss Caruthers, as has been said, was very artistic, and had furnished her house, as the other Housemistresses objected, more with a view to appearance than to solid wearing property. She was also very proud of her furniture, and her first thought when she saw Alistair mount on the table, after she had recovered from her surprise, was for the table, not the girl. 'She 'll spoil it!' she murmured; then, waking up to a sense of her duty and the unseemliness of the scene, she added, 'Come down! Come down at once!'

Unfortunately, for the moment, Miss Caruthers could not remember Alistair's name, and that young person did not pay any attention to the command, which, as a matter of fact, she never even heard, so excited was she and so noisy was her dance.

No one liked to interfere; indeed, it was not

easy, for Alistair's feet were flying about, and her face was turned up and looking out away towards the Highlands.

The servants by this time, hearing the noise and yells, as they also, in their ignorance of Highland music, called it, had now come in, and the girls' maid, who had superintended the unpacking, and kept a maternal eye on the young ladies, was the first to grasp the situation.

She hurried forward, and seizing Alistair's foot, which happened to be flung out in her direction, called out, 'Miss, stop!'

The effect was electrical. Alistair came back from the Highlands, and stood there, her eyes shining, her cheeks glowing, and her red hair in wilder disorder than even Katherine had ever seen it. She, too, went towards her cousin.

'Come down, Alistair; you are spoiling Miss Caruthers's table,' she said, looking flushed and miserable.

The head-girl, whose business it was to keep the girls of Lorne House in order for Miss Caruthers, also came to Alistair, and offered her a hand to descend.

Alistair looked down upon them, and then at the rest of her audience, and seeing only disapproval or mockery on the faces round, grew grave too. 'I forgot; you will not be caring for Highland dances. I'm sorry if I've spoiled the table. Of course I'll be able to get another like

it,' she said, as, disdaining the outstretched hands round her, she lightly sprang to the floor.

'We will say grace, please,' said Miss Caruthers; and she did so, and the girls trooped out to the study, there to discuss the events of the evening.

Just as they were going out, Miss Caruthers stopped two of them. 'Brenda and Winifred, will you come and have coffee with me in the drawing-room; and you, Katherine and Alistair?'

An invitation like this was a command; but Katherine, in her ignorance, did not know this, and began, 'Thank you, but I have some letters to write.'

Miss Caruthers, however, did not appear to hear, and left the room; and the girl named Brenda said, 'You must go to the drawing-room when you are asked. Miss Caruthers would think it very rude if you didn't.'

'Oh, very well; but I do so want to write a letter home.'

'You are not allowed to write letters during the week without leave,' announced Brenda as she led the way to Miss Caruthers's prettily furnished drawing-room, where, as a matter of fact, she herself did not particularly want to go, being much more desirous of talking about the new girls than to them.

Miss Caruthers had special digestive coffee, which, she declared, did not do either herself or her

pupils harm, and she took her seat at the pretty little, gold Chinese table, before the tray with coffee and delicious little cakes which the maid had just brought in.

Alistair was very tall for her age, it will be remembered, and perhaps this was why Miss Caruthers helped her first, saying, with a quiet, pleasant smile, 'You must be hot after your exertions. Some coffee will refresh you.'

'Thank you; it is hot to dance in a room,' agreed Alistair.

'Yes; I think these dances are better in the open air,' mildly observed Miss Caruthers; and this was all the comment she made to Alistair on her wild dance.

So far they had had the conversation to themselves; but now Miss Lawes, the mathematical mistress, came in for coffee, and began to talk about other things. Brenda and Winifred, who seemed quite at home with her and Miss Caruthers, joined in the conversation, and managed to include Katherine and Alistair, to whom, however, they took care not to give a chance of leading the conversation or saying 'the wrong thing,' as they would have put it.

An hour later Miss Caruthers, saying it was time for prayers, rose, and they adjourned into the hall, where the servants were assembled, and ten minutes later the girls were all in their dormitories, and peace and quiet reigned in Lorne House.

CHAPTER X.

LORNE HOUSE AND ITS INMATES.

AS the girls, having left the drawing-room, lingered for a moment to say good-night to each other, and to tell the new girls where to go, for they slept in different dormitories, they heard Miss Lawes give a sudden peal of laughter, and then Miss Caruthers's voice say in quiet but reproving accents, 'Lily, don't!'

'I can't help it; you are just magnificent!' cried Miss Eagen, and she added something which the girls could not hear, because she was evidently laughing too much to speak clearly.

Whatever it was, it was evidently very amusing, for the mathematical mistress joined in.

Brenda hurried off as soon as she had given directions, and seeing Winifred inclined to linger over 'good-nights' and last instructions to Alistair and Katherine, she said sharply, 'Come along, Winifred; don't stand eavesdropping outside your hostess's door!'

'My hostess! She's just my paid teacher!' said Winifred, moving off, however, as she was advised.

Brenda looked at her scornfully. 'We don't talk like that here, and, at any rate, we didn't pay for our entertainment to-night in Miss Caruthers's private drawing-room, so you need not repay her

by listening to her private conversation; and even if we had, one does not do that kind of servant-girl thing.'

'I was not doing any servant-girl thing!' retorted Winifred, as she went to her own cubicle, very angry with Brenda for her remarks.

'Hallo, you two, what kind of an evening have you had?' inquired Alice, putting her head out of her cubicle-door, and addressing Brenda and Winifred.

'A very pleasant one, thank you,' replied Brenda, who did not choose to acknowledge that she would rather have been in the study laughing over the extraordinary supper-time they had had.

'You don't mean it! No bagpipes or savage dances or anything? How dull! We expected you to have had some interesting description of coffee with the two wild Indians. We were wondering whether she would dance a hornpipe on Miss Caruthers's cherished gold tea-table among the egg-shell coffee-cups, and had bets about whether that would upset the placid Caruthers's imperturbable placidity,' rattled on Alice.

'Nothing under an earthquake would do that, if a scene like to-night left her unmoved,' said another girl.

'Did she make a row about it in the drawing-room—I mean, say anything severe? She couldn't make a row about anything if she tried,' said Alice.

'No; she never mentioned it; and the moral of that is, if you want to be asked into the drawing-room and have delicious coffee with cream and lovely cakes, behave like a lunatic,' said Winifred, who was glad to give vent to her ill-temper.

'Was that why you were asked?' inquired a voice from within a cubicle.

Winifred vouchsafed no answer to this insulting inquiry; and Brenda broke into the conversation, saying, 'What had Davidine to say about it?'

'Oh, Davidine was very much on her dignity, and doing the head of the House,' said Alice.

'How? Was she so shocked, then?' inquired Brenda.

'No; that's just what she was not, or pretended not to be. I suppose she was taking her cue from Miss Caruthers, and pretending that there was nothing unusual in dancing on her best Sunday-go-to-meeting polished table in the middle of supper,' said Alice.

'I suppose she was by way of upholding the House, every one in which, like Cæsar's wife, is above suspicion?' remarked another girl, much given to quotations, apropos or malapropos.

'Yes; and she says we're not to talk about it outside the House. So mind you don't say anything, Winifred,' said another girl.

'Why do you say Winifred? Why should I say anything any more than Brenda?' asked Winifred.

'Because Brenda is Davidine's chum, and is sure

to see Davidine before she goes into Big School,' said the speaker.

Big School was the large hall in which prayers were said and the roll called.

'And, besides, Brenda doesn't chatter, and you do,' said Alice.

Brenda hastily interposed, to stop the angry retort which she knew was coming, and said, 'I'm glad to know, in any case, because I might have said something in joke.'

'I shall certainly say something; it is too good a tale not to be told,' said Winifred.

'Winifred! Didn't you hear Davidine's message?' cried the other girls.

'I am not bound to take any notice of Davidine's orders; she has no right to lay down the law as to what we are to say, and what we are not to say,' declared Winifred.

'Davidine never gave any orders, I am sure; and if the head-girl of the House asks us, for the honour of the House, not to mention anything that has occurred, I think the least we can do is to attend to her wishes,' said Brenda rather hotly, for she was Davidine's champion in any House dispute, of which there were not many, Davidine being a very tactful and wise leader.

At this moment a step was heard, and one of the girls remarked, 'Talk of an angel and you hear its wings.'

'Were you talking of me? I am sorry to put

an end to such an interesting subject, but time's up and the lights will be out in ten minutes; you seemed to have forgotten that silence-time had begun, so I came up to remind you,' said Davidine, as she stood for a moment at the door of the dormitory.

'Sorry. Good-night, Davidine,' called out Brenda, who, though she was longing to speak to her chum, would not break through the silence-rule to do so.

The others, with an 'All right, Davidine!' subsided into silence; and even Winifred, though she said nothing, did not dare to speak, and the same silence now reigned in the Pink Dormitory that had already reigned in the Green one where Davidine slept.

There were two dormitories in Lorne House, each containing thirteen girls, Miss Dolling's idea being to give a home-feeling and personal supervision by means of a House-mistress for each villa, and the advantages of a big school at the same time, and Miss Caruthers had a greater influence than either she or the girls were aware of.

When Miss Eagen and Miss Lawes had finished laughing, they looked half-apologetically at Miss Caruthers, who had only smiled faintly.

'I am really very sorry, Miss Caruthers,' said Miss Lawes, 'but Miss Eagen's merriment was infectious, and the remembrance of that scene was too much for me.'

'It was my fault, really, in the beginning, so I hope you won't punish the girl too severely for it,' said Miss Eagen.

'There is nothing punishable in what she did,' remarked Miss Caruthers calmly.

'Oh, well, I don't know. If that kind of thing is to become the fashion, good-bye to artistic furniture, to say nothing of discipline and decency, for a girl of that age ought to know better than to make a spectacle of herself on a table!' exclaimed Miss Eagen.

'She is not so old as she looks; Scotch girls are tall, as a rule. I believe she is only thirteen,' remarked Miss Caruthers.

'Anyway, that's too old to dance upon tables. It's ruined, you know, Nell,' said Miss Eagen, who had been at school with Miss Caruthers, and now came to keep house for her, and, as a housekeeper, objected to the ruination of the furniture under her care, of which, as she knew, Miss Caruthers was very fond.

'I don't think so; it is only the polish she has spoiled,' said Miss Caruthers.

'On the contrary, it's cracked. I heard it crack when she made her final whoop, or whatever she calls it, and I stopped to investigate after supper. I should give her a good scolding to-morrow, and tell Miss Dolling about it. She ought to buy you another table,' objected Miss Eagen.

'I ought not to have had a table like that for use in the dining-room,' observed Miss Caruthers, but she made no reply to Miss Eagen's other remarks. Miss Caruthers was a very silent woman, so the other two had got into the habit of talking together, and Miss Lawes now asked of Miss Eagen, 'By the way, why did you say it was your fault? Surely you did not ask that girl—what is her name?—Alistair, isn't it?—to dance?'

'Well, yes, I did,' admitted Miss Eagen.

Even Miss Caruthers looked up in surprise, though she said nothing.

'In that case, I think you ought to be punished. What could you have been thinking of? Explain yourself, Miss Eagen,' said Miss Lawes.

'I did not ask her to dance upon a table. The facts are that she was describing the Highland fling and sword-dance as danced in the north, and demonstrated it with knives, among which she danced with her fingers—very cleverly, too—and I said I should like to see it danced, and asked her if she would dance it for us one day; whereupon, before I could say a word, Alistair, no doubt thinking there is no time like the present, got up, and the rest you know.'

'I am very glad to know that; I thought it was not her fault,' said Miss Caruthers.

'I am very sorry,' said Miss Eagen penitently, but with a twinkle in her eye; 'but I maintain that I could not have foreseen such a result. I

shall steer clear of that young lady in the future, as I fear she is going to give trouble.'

'Yes; I don't think our new pupils are a great acquisition,' observed Miss Lawes.

'On the contrary, that's just what I believe they will be,' said Miss Caruthers.

It is noticeable that when Miss Caruthers did speak, people always attended to what she said, probably because she spoke so seldom.

So now Miss Lawes inquired respectfully, 'Do you really? No doubt you are a better judge of girls than I am.'

'I believe that's sheer contradiction, or else a blind adoration of Lorne House, belonging to which makes you desirable,' declared Miss Eagen.

'We shall see; but I prophesy that at the end of this year' [Miss Caruthers meant, of course, the school year, which had only just begun, and which ended in July] 'you will have the same opinion as I have about the two new girls,' said Miss Caruthers with her quiet smile.

'You are not thinking of specialising in display dancing, are you?' inquired Miss Eagen, who liked to tease her old schoolfellow.

Miss Caruthers only smiled, but said no more.

'There is one girl here whom I do not think an acquisition; in fact, she is almost the only girl in the school I really dislike,' said Miss Lawes. 'I mean Winifred Morgan.'

'Oh, that girl! I should think she is not an

acquisition, indeed! A more unwholesome-looking girl I never saw, and a less attractive character. I can't think why Miss Dolling accepted her; I thought she would not have girls over fourteen, and here are two that she has taken lately,' said Miss Eagen.

'Katherine, of course, is her own niece, but Winifred Morgan has not even that claim upon her, and I can't help thinking she is not a good influence in the school, and I can't imagine why we are saddled with these trying girls,' said Miss Lawes.

'Can't you?' said Miss Eagen.

But Miss Caruthers—who did not like her pupils to be adversely criticised, and did not want to hear the compliment she knew was on Miss Eagen's lips, to the effect that Miss Dolling knew the power the head of Lorne possessed of taming and moulding the most unpromising girl—interrupted by saying, 'Miss Dolling wanted them in the Big House with her, but she had not room, so she asked me to take the two new girls. As for Winifred, she has a great deal of good in her, and a year of our healthy life will make a very nice girl of her. Shall we go to bed?'

Miss Eagen lingered for a moment after Miss Lawes had gone, and laid her hand upon Miss Caruthers's arm. 'You are not vexed with me? I believe I am as much trouble to you as the girls,' she said.

Miss Caruthers only smiled; no one at Nun's Eaton had ever heard her laugh, though she was not in the least melancholy. 'Not in the least; as you know, you are a great help to me, for I feel that I can say anything to you, and that you understand me.'

Miss Caruthers knew that she was not always understood, and that her very silence had been taken for stupidity by some of the less discriminating of the staff.

Only one person lay awake in Lorne House that night, and that was Katherine Kerr, who tossed and turned, and could not get the soft down-pillow into a comfortable position, until she buried her head in it and sobbed herself to sleep.

CHAPTER XI.

TWO IMPOSSIBLE PUPILS.

THE next morning a sunbeam, shining in at the window of her cubicle, found its way to Katherine's face and woke her.

Katherine's first thought was one of annoyance with her maid for not having drawn down the blind and kept out the sun, which had disturbed her; and her next was that it was not the maid's fault, for she was in town, while her young mistress was here at Nun's Eaton, where she had been foolish enough to ask to come.

However, that was a mistake easily remedied, and Katherine, sitting up in bed, stretched out her hand to the chest of drawers, which, the cubicle being tiny, was close against her narrow bed, opened the top drawer nearest her, and took out her writing-desk.

She opened a secret compartment, made specially for her, and taking from it her book of poems—that is, the little book in which she wrote her essays and poetry—began to write. But, alas! after the third word thoughts ceased to come, and her pen made impossible hieroglyphics all round the page. At last she shut the book. 'That settles it,' she said, and putting the book into its secret drawer, she took out a sheet of note-paper;

and this time she was evidently more successful, for she wrote so fast that soon a sheet of note-paper was filled.

'My dearest Mother,—I find I made a mistake in asking to come here. I think I am too old to begin school-life. The girls are uncongenial and too boyish to suit me, and the teaching is evidently very inferior to home tuition, as you have often said to Aunt Amy.

'And even Aunt Amy is quite different here from what she is in London; she is ever so far off, and she has taken no notice of me, so that my being here is no pleasure to her and my going away will make no difference, as there are five hundred girls.

'Will you, please, come and fetch me as soon as you get this letter? Don't delay, because I do not want to go into what they call Big School at all. I am going to stop in bed to-day and say I am not well enough to do lessons—which is quite true, for my head is aching dreadfully and I feel tired and miserable in this dreadful prison, where I can't even console myself by writing.—Your loving and unhappy daughter, Katherine.

'*P.S.*—You will get this letter by lunch-time, so you can easily come down to-day. Oh, how delightful to be back at home again!

'*P.P.S.*—You can give papa two good reasons for taking me away. First, Alistair, who behaved

in such a mad way last night, jumping up on a beautiful table of Miss Caruthers's, our House-mistress, who invited us to coffee on a gold table, and dancing a Highland jig and shouting as if—though I don't like to say such a thing—as if she was intoxicated; but of course she wasn't, as she only drinks water. The other reason is that they give you no maid, and I can't possibly do all those things for myself; if I could, it would be wasting valuable time in which I might be acquiring knowledge.'

With the two postscripts, Katherine had filled two sheets of note-paper, and it was a very bulky missive that she addressed to Mrs Kerr.

Just as she had finished the direction and closed the envelope a bell rang, and a rustling of sheets and yawning were heard as the girls woke out of sound slumbers; then the filling of baths and splashing of water as the girls jumped into the 'cold tubs,' which most of them took. Katherine, too, was used to a daily bath, but the maid filled it and took the chill off with a can of hot water.

This morning no maid came to pay any such attention; but, as Katherine said to herself as she turned over and settled herself down in bed, it did not matter as she was not going to get up till the afternoon, and not then unless her parents came and fetched her.

Katherine and Alistair were in the Green Dormitory, one at each end. Katherine's cubicle was

opposite the cubicle of Davidine, the head-girl of Lorne; Alistair's looked out on the park, and was the corner cubicle.

Each cubicle was divided from the other by a partition of match-boarding and chintz curtains. Curtains, which could be drawn back by day, formed the door. Each cubicle had a window with a wide ledge, and was furnished with a very comfortable bed (though Katherine could not get to sleep on it), a chest of drawers, washstand, bath, and a chair.

Katherine chose to consider hers like a prison cell, which she had never seen; but it was really a very pretty, cosy little room, and so Alistair thought as she, wakened by the same intrusive sunbeam, jumped up and looked out over the park to the hills and woodlands beyond.

Perhaps if she had gone to Nun's Eaton straight from her Highland home it might not have seemed such a delightful place to her; but, coming to it after London, where she could not breathe, it seemed to her just the contrary to a prison. She got up, jumped into her bath, dressed very expeditiously, and having brushed her unruly hair after a fashion, stood for a moment in the middle of her cubicle considering which way she had better get out into the park.

The door would seem to most girls to be the proper way, but Alistair reflected that she did not know her way to the front-door, and that it

would be quite an easy drop from the first-floor window of her cubicle on to the garden-bed below; so, swiftly mounting on the ledge, she swung herself out, and hanging from the window, dropped lightly to the ground.

It was a longer jump than most girls would have cared to take; but Alistair was too much at home among trees, from which she often dropped, and had even been dropped, to feel this fall, and she jumped up and ran across the heavily bedewed grass, and up the hill to the woods she could see in the distance, where there were wood-pigeons, and no doubt all sorts of wild birds and animals.

How good the air was, and how delightful to scamper about the country all alone and with no hateful houses near! For Alistair was now far in the woods, and no sign of human habitation or human beings could she see; only a pheasant rose, startled, at her approach. She felt she could spend hours here. Miss Dolling, Miss Caruthers, Nun's Eaton were all forgotten.

The second bell rang and the curtains of the cubicles were drawn back to let the air from the wide-open windows pass through the dormitory from side to side. Only two cubicles remained closed; they were the cubicles of the two new girls, neither of whom seemed to be moving.

Davidine, as in duty bound, had told the girls when they came up from Miss Caruthers's drawing-room they might speak while undressing, but that

it was silence-time for ten minutes before the lights went out, and that the bell rang at seven o'clock to get up, and again at half-past seven to go down to breakfast.

She now knocked at the wooden partition of Alistair's cubicle, and getting no answer, drew the curtain, meaning to waken the girl gently; but what was her astonishment to see the room empty, and the bath and copious splashes of water showing that Alistair was up and dressed!

Suddenly a thought struck her, and carefully avoiding the puddles on the floor, she picked up her skirts, which were not so long after all, stepped across the cubicle to the window, and looked out. There on the garden-bed she saw footprints, two very deep, and some broken plants where Alistair had jumped down.

For a moment Davidine thought the girl must have hurt herself, and looked anxiously round to see if she was lying wounded anywhere near; but no sign of Alistair was to be seen. So she had evidently got away safely; it was not such a very great distance to the ground, and the head-girl came to the conclusion that the new girl had run away.

Then she remembered the other silent cubicle, and wondered whether the two had gone off together. Such a disgrace had never fallen upon Lorne House before, and Davidine felt as if, somehow, she were to blame. She walked swiftly down

the dormitory and pulled back Katherine's curtains, fully expecting to find the cubicle empty, and it is doubtful which was the more surprised, the head girl or Katherine, who, forgetting the rôle of invalid, sat up in bed and looked indignantly at this unmannerly intruder.

'I—I beg your pardon. I thought you had gone,' stammered Davidine, rather confused by Katherine's grave, rebuking eyes.

'No; I don't feel well enough to get up. Will you, please, have my breakfast sent to me, and ask the maid to post this letter for me?' replied Katherine, holding out her letter.

Davidine took it rather reluctantly. It was on the tip of her tongue to say that it was against the rules to write letters in one's cubicle; but really these two new girls were beyond her powers of control, and she decided that she had better leave Miss Caruthers to cope with them—if, indeed, one of them had not disappeared for ever. So she took the letter down with her to give it to Miss Caruthers; but, as it happened, Miss Caruthers was not there and Miss Eagen was in charge.

'Katherine Kerr is not well enough to get up, and wants her breakfast in bed and this letter posted,' Davidine told her.

'Not well? The doctor must go and see her at once. I hope to goodness she has not brought anything into the school—it would be too trying; and didn't you tell her it was against the rules

to write letters in her cubicle?' inquired Miss Eagen.

'No, I didn't; the fact was I was afraid she might disappear like her cousin,' replied the girl.

'What do you mean?' demanded Miss Eagen.

And Davidine told the tale.

'What a couple! What could Miss Dolling have been thinking of to saddle us with two such impossible girls?' cried Miss Eagen, who spoke very freely to Davidine.

'There's only one left now,' Davidine reminded her.

'Dear me! of course; that's very serious. We must tell Miss Caruthers, and send the doctor to the one that is here,' observed Miss Eagen, and she went off to the room of the House-mistress.

Miss Caruthers grew a little graver than usual as she gave orders for the doctor to be sent for, and went herself to Katherine's cubicle. A very few minutes were enough to show her that Katherine's heavy eyes were caused by crying, and that there was nothing else the matter with her; but all she said was that breakfast would be sent up to her, and that she hoped Katherine would feel better after it. Then she left her to see about Alistair, whose disappearance she did not mention to Katherine, as the latter evidently knew nothing about it, and would only be disturbed by the news.

The first thing to do was to examine the foot-

marks under the window, and Miss Caruthers, with a quiet care which was natural to her, picked off the broken stalks and replanted the uprooted plants, and then began her inquiries of the gardeners; but no one had seen Alistair, who had made her escape before they arrived.

There was nothing for it but to tell Miss Dolling, and Miss Caruthers slowly made her way to the glass study, where the Head-mistress and her secretary sat in a snug room, lined with pigeonholes, two sides of which were of glass, and outside which late roses climbed and nodded at them through the panes of what had once been a conservatory, and had been chosen for its central position.

Miss Dolling heard the tale in silence. But when she had finished by saying she was very sorry, Miss Caruthers looked at her chief, and saw her eyes dancing with merriment.

'It is I who ought to apologise for inflicting my two unruly nieces—for Alistair is almost a niece—upon you; but I knew you would manage them all right,' said Miss Dolling.

'But I haven't! One is in bed, and I have no doubt that that letter I have given you is from her asking to be taken away because she is so unhappy; and the other has already taken the law into her own hands and gone away.'

'She has only taken an early morning walk, or I am very much mistaken, and will come back full of life and joy; and as for Katherine, I will

soon settle her. That letter can go into the post-box; it will not be cleared until Sunday, and by then she will probably have changed her opinion about Nun's Eaton and will write quite another kind of letter, so don't worry about either of them. I wish I could have seen Alistair dancing her jig. She must have looked the incarnation of the mountains,' said Miss Dolling.

CHAPTER XII.

THE TAMING OF THE TWO NEW GIRLS.

KATHERINE KERR'S breakfast was sent up to her—a very appetising breakfast, not one for an invalid, but just the kind of breakfast to cheer up a homesick girl, and Katherine did full justice to it.

After the maid had taken away the tray, and the dormitory had been done, and all the windows thrown wide open, Katherine began to feel a little chilly and to wish to get up; but the thought of facing all those five hundred girls discouraged her, and she lay still, wondering when her aunt would come and see her, or whether she would come and see her at all. Katherine was half-inclined to hope that she would not; it would give her a better excuse if she could say her aunt had never been near her, even when she was ill.

This excuse, however, she was not to have, for she heard Miss Dölling's quick, energetic step and her clear, decided voice in the corridor, and then the curtains were drawn aside as her aunt entered the cubicle.

'You don't feel very fit, Katherine? I am not surprised; it has been a plunge into the untried water of school-life, and it has given you a little shock. Isn't that it? You did not quite know what you

were letting yourself in for coming to school at nearly sixteen, and taking under your protection another untamed scholar.'

'No, I didn't,' began Katherine eagerly, for this seemed a good opportunity to say that now that she had realised what she had done, she saw her mistake and wished to undo it by going away at once.

But Miss Dolling gave her no time to say any more, and continued: 'All the same, it was what the girls would call "very sporting of you," and I don't mind telling you now that I have long wished to have my only niece at my school; so you must get better quickly and come and be introduced to the rest of my girls, whom you will like very much when you know them—they are such nice, healthy-minded, healthy-bodied girls, most of them. By the way, I hear your healthy young cousin gave an unexpected demonstration of her physical powers last night; you must give her a hint that such things are not quite—what shall we say?—convenable. But do not hurt her feelings; she is very sensitive like yourself, and she is not used to the trammels of conventionalities. You can help her more than we can; for instance, she jumped out of the window and went for a walk before any one was up, which is not allowed; no one knows this but you, so do not let it go further.'

'Aunt Amy, I wrote a letter home,' began Katherine again.'

'Yes, I know; it was brought to me, as is the

rule, and of course you did not know that Sunday is the day for letter-writing, unless there is any special reason for writing another day, when, of course, you are allowed to do so. However, I put it in the post-box, and it will go with the other letters at the usual time,' said Miss Dolling, rising as she spoke and kissing Katherine before she left her with a nod, but no directions as to when she was to get up. She had yet to learn that Miss Dolling never interfered with the House-mistresses, who were responsible for their Houses and their inmates, although she was absolute ruler of the whole school and its villas.

The morning went very slowly, as it seemed to Katherine, and even a very good dinner did not help matters much, and she began to long for the motor to arrive; at the same time, she rather dreaded seeing her aunt's face when she found out what the letter had been about, for Miss Dolling had a way of looking at one when one had done anything underhand or unworthy that made one feel very uncomfortable.

After dinner, when Katherine was considering whether, at any rate, she had not better get up so as to be ready for her parents when they did come, the maid appeared. 'Miss Caruthers thinks you might get up now and go into her room, and as she says you are not yet used to doing your own hair, she said I might come and show you how to do it,' she said.

Katherine accordingly got up with the maid's help, and went downstairs to Miss Caruthers's room, where she found the House-mistress of Lorne sitting writing. 'They are playing hockey, and I am just going to watch the game; if you will put on your school cloak it will keep you nice and warm, and you can come with me,' said Miss Caruthers, pointing to a voluminous dark-blue cloak with a large hood, which the girls wore out of doors, and which Miss Dolling had copied from the peasant women of Brittany. 'It makes you all look like the monks of old, I always think when I see you crossing the park.'

This last remark of Miss Caruthers gave Katherine the courage she needed to face the other girls. Enshrouded in this cloak, she did not feel so shy, and so ashamed, too, of not having been to school before. Besides, from the playing-fields she could see the motor coming; so she put on the cloak and went out with Miss Caruthers and made her first public outing into Nun's Eaton.

And in the meantime where was Alistair? Breakfast-time came and went and no Alistair; but Miss Caruthers, acting upon Miss Dolling's advice, took no outward notice, and except Davidine and the gardeners, who had to be asked, no one knew that she had left the house in any unusual way; and though the girls missed the two new-comers and asked Davidine where they were, they got no information from her, and had some vague

idea that they were being kept apart until they learnt to behave like other people.

However, at twelve o'clock, when a great bell rang for the dinner-hour in a factory near, Alistair, feeling the pangs of hunger, made her way back. She had wandered farther than she knew, but it was with a light and springy step that she crossed the park and approached Nun's Eaton.

Arrived there, she stood for a while irresolute, not knowing exactly where she belonged. Miss Dolling, glancing up from her work, saw the tall, slight figure, looking like nothing so much as the deer of her Highlands. She stepped to the glass door, and opening it, called to Alistair.

The girl's look of perplexity vanished, and she smiled brightly as she stepped forward and said, 'Good-morning, Miss Dolling; I have had such a beautiful morning, but I have had no breakfast yet, and I am hungry.'

'And what about school, Alistair? This is not a very polite way of treating me your first day in my house.'

Alistair looked surprised and then sorry, as she said impulsively, 'I never thought of it; of course I should have been at my studies. I only meant to go for a run before breakfast and get back by eight o'clock, but I just forgot everything when I got into the dear woods and saw the birds and the pheasants and all the other live creatures.'

'Yes; but they did not belong to you; those

woods are preserved, and are not open to the public,' observed Miss Dolling.

'Then that is why I met no one. I must not go there again,' said Alistair.

'Perhaps it will be best not to go out alone. Davidine will take you or send some one with you. And now go and tidy yourself, and I will send for a cup of tea. Dinner will be ready in another hour, so you had better not take too much breakfast.'

'Thank you very much, Miss Dolling,' said Alistair, beaming at the Head-mistress.

The Head-mistress and her secretary looked at each other when Alistair had gone to Lorne House, and they both smiled.

'It is a pleasure to look at such a frank, open countenance,' said Miss Dolling.

'Yes; she is evidently a child of Nature,' agreed the secretary.

Alistair had her cup of tea and a slice of bread-and-butter, and then Miss Dolling took her into the form to which she belonged, and introducing her to the mistress as 'my sister's niece, almost my niece,' left her there, but not before she felt Alistair's fingers steal into her left hand and give it a squeeze, in acknowledgment of Miss Dolling's kindly acceptance of her as a connection, which somehow made her feel less lonely, and as if she belonged specially to Miss Dolling and must do her credit. It was not without reason that Miss Dolling

was considered to be one of the most successful Head-mistresses of her day, and to have a knowledge of girl nature which was little short of miraculous.

After the geography lesson, to which Alistair listened as attentively as she could, the gong sounded, and the girl next her said, 'We wash our hands for dinner now. You will lunch at Lorne. There are two Lorne girls; you will know them by the orange ties. I am Morrison, with mauve, as you see; but any Lorne girl will take you up to the House if you ask her. Ah, here's Davidine; she'll take you.—Davidine, Alistair Comyns wants to be taken to dinner,' she called out to the tall, handsome girl who was passing by, but who was very little taller than Alistair.

The head-girl of Lorne turned at once and said pleasantly, 'Only too glad to see you. You gave me a nice fright this morning when I saw your window open and found you had jumped out. I half-expected to see the pieces down below.'

'I am so sorry I frightened you. Miss Dolling says I am to ask you to show me the ways of the place; at least I think that was what she meant. I have been trespassing this morning through not knowing,' said Alistair.

'It doesn't matter, especially as no one but me knows, or it would give a bad example, and other girls might want to go out when they felt inclined. It was a pity you missed your lessons; it's such a

bore getting behind. But you ought to be good at gymnastics, are you not?' inquired Davidine.

'I have never done any, but I am going to learn; it will be good exercise, as I shall not be able to take long rides or walks.'

'Oh, but you can ride. I ride twice a week, and I shall be so glad if you will come with me,' said Davidine.

Alistair's eyes sparkled with delight, and she looked so bright and attractive that Davidine continued: 'We are having a hockey trial this afternoon. Would you like to play? I suppose you have a gym. dress?'

'I suppose you mean that short serge blouse and skirt? Yes; Katherine, my cousin, and I have both got one, and I should like to play a game of hockey very much.'

'Alistair Comyns is playing in the trials this afternoon,' announced Davidine at dinner.

Miss Caruthers was at one end and Miss Eagen at the other, and Alistair was opposite her, and no one dared to make any comment on this, which Davidine very probably knew when she chose that moment to make the statement.

Immediately after dinner the girls hurried off to get their playing-shoes, and Davidine kept Alistair beside her, and walked to the hockey-ground with her, so that the girl had no chance of hearing any unkind remarks on her being chosen, and so having her pleasure dashed.

But when the two girls had gone on, the discontent found vent in words. Alice, of course, was loudest of all in her protests. 'Davidine takes a high hand, with a vengeance! Why should that unkempt savage of the mountains be put into the hockey team over our heads just to curry favour with Miss Dolling?' she declared.

'That is very unjust, Alice. You know Davidine is above doing such a thing; and as for being unkempt, Alistair's hair is beautiful, and that golden-red hair always does stand out like a halo round the lucky possessor's head,' said Brenda.

'Bravo, Brenda! Turning poetical, are you? Of course you stand up for Davidine, and it's apparently a case of "Love me, love my dog," since you admire Alistair Comyns too,' said Winifred.

Brenda took no notice of this remark, and hurried on to catch up Davidine and Alistair, with whom she walked on to the pitch.

It was this game which Miss Caruthers had invited Katherine to come and watch, and it was just at the most exciting point that the two came on the field, and that Katherine saw her first hockey game at Nun's Eaton, and, as it happened, the first game she had ever seen in her life.

CHAPTER XIII.

STRANGE IDEAS.

WHILE Katherine had been in bed Alistair had been making acquaintance with school and its ways, and, as we have seen, was in a fair way to win golden opinions from her schoolfellows, who liked a sporting girl.

'You have never been to school before?' said a girl with a supercilious air of 'I know everything that is worth knowing' about her.

'No,' said Alistair.

'You will find it very difficult at first, then; but I shall be glad to help you, if you like,' replied the other.

'You are very kind, and I shall be very glad of your help if I need it; but why shall I find it difficult?' demanded Alistair.

'Why? Because you have never been to school before,' explained her companion.

'Ah! you mean the lessons. Thank you, I shall very likely be glad of your help,' said Alistair.

'Oh, not the lessons. I am afraid I shall not have time to help you with them; besides, of course, we shall not be in the same class. I only meant help you to understand school; that must be so difficult,' said Alistair's new companion pointedly.

Alistair looked puzzled. 'I don't understand. What is difficult?' she asked.

'Why, to understand school ways and etiquette. Perhaps you won't like my saying this, but you seem to be rather ignorant upon some points,' replied the other, rather exasperated by Alistair's apparent denseness.

'You mean because I danced a Scotch dance last night? But you need not be afraid that I shall do that again. I saw it did not please you, and of course I do not know the rules yet, but I shall soon learn them, if you will kindly tell me them or give me the written list,' said Alistair.

'There are no rules—not written ones; there are some things we know we may not do, and we don't do them unless we are stupid or naughty; but there are some unwritten laws. I can tell you one is that the girl next her changes the mistress's plate at supper, and waits upon her if she needs it; and you might tell your cousin this. She sat there like a stuck pig last night and never paid any attention to Miss Caruthers, and one of the other mistresses had to get up and wait on her.'

'I would not call my cousin a pig; she is very nice-looking,' said Alistair, somewhat stiffly for her, for she was rather shocked at this language, freedom of speech not being encouraged by her late aunt or Jeanie.

'Of course I did not mean that! She is very aristocratic-looking. It 's only a way of talking,

and it just shows that you are not used to school talk, your noticing it,' cried the girl.

'But I am glad to know that rule about waiting on the mistress next you. I have not been used to that, for we had only our two selves and people to wait on us; but here it is different — very different,' said Alistair, and her eyes grew sad and dreamy as she looked away into the past.

'You must not mind making mistakes at first. I know it makes one feel miserable to have done the wrong thing,' began the other eagerly. She thought Alistair's sad look meant that she was unhappy about her mistake and her cousin's.

But Alistair soon undeceived the girl. She looked startled, and exclaimed, 'A wrong thing! What wrong thing have I done? It was quite unintentional!'

Alistair's self-appointed mentor looked half-annoyed and half-embarrassed. She thought this was the densest new girl she had ever had to do with, and but for her being a Lorne girl, and therefore a girl who must be knocked into shape for the credit of the House, she would have left her to flounder along by herself. As a matter of fact, she might have saved herself the trouble she took, for Alistair did not profit in the least by her advice, and did flounder along by herself, getting into very deep water at times, as will be seen. However, this was Alistair's first day, and the girls had great hopes of her; so her mentor

continued: 'I know it was unintentional, and I should not be unhappy about it.'

'But what is it? What is the wrong thing that I have done?' again inquired Alistair.

'Dear me, how you do repeat the same word! It was not a very great sin, but—well, you know, dancing on strange people's tables isn't quite the thing, is it? I only mean just to warn you,' exclaimed the other girl, rather floundering in her speech as she felt Alistair's eyes fixed on her.

'It was not a sin at all. You have strange ideas of what is wrong if you call that a sin,' cried Alistair indignantly.

'I did not mean to offend you; but it was not quite right, and I only said it was not a very great sin,' protested the girl.

'A sin is an awful thing, because it offends God, and you have no right to say I have done wrong when I have not,' said Alistair angrily. She was unconsciously quoting her nurse, though she had forgotten her old nurse's warning against her besetting sin, her pride and temper.

The other girl began to feel more and more uncomfortable. This was such an odd girl; she wished she had not begun to talk to her at all. 'I was only joking; you take things so seriously,' she said.

'I think sin is a serious thing, and I do not care to joke about it,' said Alistair. Then seeing that the other looked embarrassed at this down-

right talk, which was not the usual way girls talked, especially to strangers, she said with a pleasant smile — and Alistair's smile was very pleasant—'But please tell me about your school etiquette. I see you do not shake hands when you meet. I suppose it is not the custom?'

'I should think not, indeed. Why, we should never get through our work if we had to go being polite to each other,' cried her new acquaintance, delighted to have got upon safe ground again, and lapsing into bad grammar.

'I see it is not etiquette to be polite to each other,' said Alistair gravely.

The girl looked sharply at Alistair to see if she was making fun of her. 'You are pulling my leg now,' she observed.

Alistair simply stared at her. 'What did you say?' she asked.

'Brenda,' called out the other girl to a big girl who was passing, 'come and explain things to Alistair Comyns, as she does not seem to understand me.'

Brenda laughed. 'Is she trying to initiate you into school ways? You must find it very difficult.'

Here the other girl laughed a little triumphantly.

'What's the joke?' inquired Brenda.

'That is just what she said, that I should find school difficult. I don't quite know what you mean. The only thing that will be difficult will be to understand you. I do not think the teachers—mistresses you call them—at all difficult.'

'Oh no; they are mostly commonplace,' said the girl superciliously. 'Except Miss Dolling; she is an interesting person.'

'I think Miss Caruthers very interesting,' said Alistair quietly.

'She always reminds me of a cow; she chews the cud of her own thoughts. But she is a placid, amiable body enough.'

'You do not know Miss Caruthers, or you would not talk like that; she is one of the best-read mistresses here, and she has passed very high examinations; and it is very bad form to run down your House-mistress, especially to a new girl,' cried Brenda indignantly.

'Oh, I should not take any notice of what she said,' observed Alistair.

This was too much for the other. 'In that case I will not inflict my conversation upon you any longer,' she said, and, with a bow, she went off.

Brenda followed her. 'Don't be absurd and take offence at nothing,' she said.

'My dear, I was not in the least offended. I was only dying for an excuse to get away. Such a time as I have had! I wished to be amiable and make conversation, and give a new girl—who seems very new, to put it mildly—a few tips, and, lo and behold! I bring a puritan tirade about sin and wrong, and offending Providence, and what not, on my head.'

'What! from Alistair Comyns? Is she that

sort of girl? I thought from her behaviour last night that she was wild and full of larks,' cried Brenda.

'She may be; but apparently she does not consider that wrong. As long as a thing is not a sin she will do it; and as she considers our ideas of wrong "strange," hers are probably quite different, so we may expect a series of wild performances which, not being wrong in her eyes, she will see no harm in. But I wash my hands of her. I only wish she had not come to Lorne House, for I feel, somehow, as if she will be a nuisance and not do us credit.'

'She has a nice face,' said Brenda.

'I think she has rather a wild look,' retorted the other; and then they talked of other things.

Alistair, being left alone, did what she had been taught to do as a little girl in the north. When she did not know what to do, she knelt down to pray. She was alone in the study, and she did not know any one was near or could hear her, so she prayed aloud for guidance in this strange place where she felt all alone.

While she was kneeling there and speaking aloud Alice entered the room, and hearing a voice, stopped to listen. Her eyes grew round with astonishment; then she turned and fled.

'Davidine,' she cried to the head-girl, whom she met with Brenda, 'that new girl you are making such a fuss about is a freak!'

Brenda, who had just left Alistair's mentor, said, 'So it seems from all accounts. But what is her latest?'

'She's having a prayer-meeting all by herself in the study,' said Alice.

'Well, let her; it doesn't do you any harm, and it may do her good,' said Davidine.

'It does do me harm; it gave me a most awful shock,' objected Alice.

The other two laughed, but Brenda said seriously, 'Davidine, I do dislike peculiar people; one never knows what they are going to do next. I wish you would give Alistair a few hints.'

'About praying? No, thank you. I believe in freedom; and I dare say, if the truth were known, she is fitter to give us hints than we her,' said Davidine quietly.

'I'm much obliged, but I would rather be without them; and she'll only get herself disliked if she goes on doing peculiar things,' said Brenda.

'Yes; and I call it hypocritical, and like the Pharisees praying upon the housetops,' put in Alice, whose strong point was not accuracy in anything, not even quotations.

'You mean at street-corners, I suppose. But this was not on the housetop nor at a street-corner. Anyway, you leave her alone, Alice; she is good at hockey.'

'I mean to leave her alone; I hate that kind of

girl,' said Alice with decision; though what kind of girl she meant she did not exactly explain.

Alistair got up from her knees feeling comforted, and went off to the hockey-match meaning to do her best.

She had no idea she had made an enemy of Alice, and perhaps but for this girl's enmity her first term at Nun's Eaton might have been very different, and she might have been more popular, for she turned out to be very good at outdoor games.

But if she had known it would not have made any difference to Alistair; a thing was right or it was wrong. If it was wrong she would have none of it; if it was right, why, it must be done. 'Duty first, Miss Alistair,' she had heard from her babyhood, and 'Duty first' became second nature to her.

But it was not for some time that the girls of Nun's Eaton grasped this fact or appreciated it, high though the ideal of duty was that Miss Dolling tried to teach them.

CHAPTER XIV.

SCHOOL AND PLAY.

ANY one noticing attentively Miss Caruthers's expression would have seen that she had a quiet smile of amusement on her face as she listened to the conversation with which Katherine was trying to entertain her.

The fact was that Katherine Kerr, without being aware of it, was patronising Miss Caruthers, who she had decided in her mind was 'an amiable, placid sort of person, not particularly interesting, but nice enough to talk to.' She was not aware either that her companion had passed very high not only in classics but also in science at Oxford. Nor did she in the least understand what character that placid exterior covered. Whereas Miss Caruthers understood the girl beside her very well, and was quite aware that she was being patronised, though she took no notice of it, and answered all the questions about the games and school very politely.

Katherine, who was very much ashamed of Alistair's exhibition the evening before, took the opportunity of apologising for her cousin, who, she said, was rather uncivilsed.

'You are neither of you used to school ways, so we make allowances for you,' said Miss Caruthers;

and this gentle snub was all she administered to Katherine.

Then as they reached the hockey-ground she called Brenda and said, 'Will you take charge of Katherine Kerr, and explain the game to her?'

Brenda came forward and said, 'Certainly, Miss Caruthers,' in a friendly but respectful tone.

'Do you mind standing on the other side so that we can see the gate?' inquired Katherine.

Again Brenda said, 'Certainly,' but this time not so friendly. For a girl who came out to see a hockey trial, and chose a post where she could also see the gate, towards which her attention was chiefly directed, and this at a moment when one of her House had got a goal, was certainly not 'sporting.'

At last she said, 'Are you expecting any one that you look at the gate so often?'

'Yes; my father and mother are coming to fetch me this afternoon,' said Katherine. She spoke as if it was a settled thing, because whatever she had wished at home always was accomplished; and it is very probable that if the letter had been sent off, Mrs Kerr, if she had been at home, would have started for Nun's Eaton as soon as the car came round; for Katherine's mother, who adored her daughter, missed her very much and half-regretted having given way to her wish to go to school. So Katherine was not guilty of untruthfulness when she made this confident assertion, though her mother was speeding with the Major

in quite a different direction, that kindly man having guessed his wife's feelings, and having suggested a flying visit to some friends at Brighton to divert her.

Brenda took her eyes for a minute off the hockey-field, and repeated in surprise, 'To fetch you? What for? It is not visiting-day, and we are not allowed to be fetched by outside people on other days.'

'Oh, these are not outside people, and they are coming to fetch me home. School does not suit me. I really came to be with my aunt, of whom I am very fond; but she is too busy for me to see as much of her as I should like, and my cousin is quite impossible. I should have tried to look after her if I had been staying; but as I am not, I wish you would be kind to her, and just tell her things, and prevent the girls laughing at her,' said Katherine.

Before she had finished her speech Brenda's attention had wandered back to the hockey-field, and she was shouting, 'Played, Lorne! Well played!' and there were shouts of 'Played, Lorne!' from all round.

Then Brenda, her cheeks flushed with excitement, turned her handsome face to her companion. 'I don't think you need be afraid of the girls laughing at any one who can play hockey like that; and she plays such a decent game, too—not for herself at all. She's a brick, that cousin of yours.'

'My cousin? What has she been doing?' inquired

Katherine, bewildered, for she had scarcely looked at the game or noticed the players; besides which, Alistair, with her hair in a plait, in gymnastic or playing costume, was a very different figure from the girl with hair flying all round her head and long black skirts. 'Is that Alistair? How odd she looks!' she cried when at length she recognised her cousin.

But the game was now over, and the girls, catching up their cloaks, threw them on and ran across the playing-grounds to their different Houses to tea.

'We'd better go too,' said Brenda, leading the way to Lorne. 'Your people haven't turned up yet, and if I were you I would not say anything about leaving to the others. It's not very complimentary; and if you don't mind my giving you a piece of advice, it will look rather silly if they don't come after all.'

Katherine's sensitive colour came at the plain speaking, but she made no reply, for a strong suspicion that Brenda was right and that they were not coming began to torment her.

'Oh Katherine, isn't school just lovely?' cried Alistair in her ringing voice when she saw her cousin enter the tea-room, which was also the dinner and supper room.

There was a shout of laughter at this, and one of the girls exclaimed, 'School, indeed! It doesn't strike me school has seen very much of you. You

only came in to one lesson this morning, and so far you have only eaten, drunk, and been merry.'

'Yes; where were you this morning, Alistair? Are you having special classes?' inquired another girl. 'Davidine would not tell us. We thought you were being hauled off to prison for destroying Miss Caruthers's property.'

'Where were you, Alistair? What's the mystery?' they persisted, for Alistair looked rather confused.

Davidine's impulse was to speak and shelter Alistair, but she decided, on second thoughts, not to do so, for fear of arousing jealousy if she seemed to favour the new pupil too much, and left Alistair to fight her own battle.

'There's no mystery. I just went for a walk, it was such a lovely morning; but I find I did wrong. I am sorry. I will come into school in proper time to-morrow morning; and I am not going out myself for walks any more, for I take no heed of time when the woods and the birds and the beasts get talking to me,' said Alistair.

'What do they say, Alistair?' inquired Alice with a sneer, which fortunately or unfortunately was lost upon Alistair.

'They say that the Lord is very good, and that all His works praise Him,' replied Alistair, looking round with bright, glad eyes.

There was an uncomfortable pause, which might have caused the ruin of Alistair's popularity, for

the girls were not used to the introduction of the name of the Deity into everyday conversation like this; but the silence was broken by a quiet voice which said in the most natural way possible, 'Yes, that is the feeling being alone with nature brings, especially in the early morning, to those whom an artificial life has not spoilt.'

It was Miss Caruthers, who had been passing the door, and hearing Alistair's remark, had come in just to say the right thing and make matters smooth again.

'You must come on our next country ramble, Alistair, and tell us about the plants and things we pass. I'm sure you know an awful lot about botany,' said Brenda.

'Indeed, I know nothing about botany, and the vegetation here is not like ours at home. But I could tell Miss Dolling something about her trees; two of them want looking to,' announced Alistair.

There was a general laugh at this, for Alistair was such a funny mixture that she interested and amused the girls. But it was now time to go into study, and the girls trooped into the prettiest schoolroom that surely was ever planned. Round the room were lockers and pigeon-holes of polished wood about two feet wide, one of which belonged, with that width of shelf above it, to each girl; and this was their shrine, so to speak, on which they kept photographs, vases of flowers, ornaments, and so forth. And perhaps in nothing else did

individual character show so distinctly as in the arrangement of these shelves and the pigeon-holes beneath them.

The lockers of course held their schoolbooks, but in the pigeon-holes were what the housemaid, who was not allowed to touch them, would dearly have loved to call rubbish if she dared, but which the girls called treasures. Bits of stone and fossils filled the shelf of one girl; another had vases of leaves and flowers gathered for botanising purposes; a third had post-cards or sketches. Each had evidence of her particular hobby in her pigeon-hole.

'These two are yours,' said Davidine, pointing to two empty lockers; and then she took her seat in the centre of the room, where were six seats apart from the rest, and more comfortable, Katherine thought.

'Those are the monitors' desks,' whispered Winifred to her. 'There are six of them, and they order us about worse than Miss Caruthers. In fact, Miss Caruthers never comes into study, so they are lords of all they survey; and don't they lord it just about!'

'Silence, there, please!' said Brenda without looking off her book.

'There, what did I tell you?' said Winifred.

'Winifred Morgan, didn't you hear me tell you to stop talking? If you speak again I shall have to report you to Miss Caruthers.'

Winifred made a face, but she did not dare to speak; and Katherine was just wondering what she had better do, for she had not been told what form she was to go into; whereas Alistair had been given her work for next day, and was now knitting her brows over her lessons.

Presently Davidine came to Katherine. 'Have you been given no work?' she asked.

'No,' said Katherine; and acting on Brenda's advice, she abstained from mentioning, as she felt inclined, that it was not worth while as she was not stopping.

Davidine left the room, and presently came back with a pile of books and a message that Katherine was to go into the Lower Fifth, and to do the work that Alice did, who would show her what to do.

Alice, who rather liked Katherine's refined appearance, and was not jealous of her as she was of Alistair, showed her what to do, and gave her all the information she wanted. 'Miss Forest is our mistress. She is horribly severe, so mind you know your work, or she'll drop on you,' she wound up.

Katherine was very fond of study, and as she was going to spend one day in school, she determined that she should leave a good impression, and do her aunt that much credit. 'Besides,' she argued to herself, 'if I do extra well and seem

to know a lot, they will see why I did not want to stay at school.'

So she bent over her books, and the monitors thought to themselves that if the two new girls always behaved so well in study, they would be very desirable additions to Lorne House study.

When study was over and the girls were free to talk till supper, the monitors gathered together.

'I say, Davidine, what manner of girls have we got now?' said one jokingly.

'Katherine Kerr is ordinary enough,' said Brenda, 'or will be after she has been here a month or so. It is the other one who is exceptional.'

'Exceptional! Is that what you call it? She seems to me to be half Methodist parson and half actress,' retorted Alice, who had joined the group.

'There's nothing actressy about Alistair Comyns. She is a child of nature, that is all, and has been brought up in the Highlands by an old nurse with strict notions of religion and duty. She was telling me about her,' said Davidine.

'Ah! that accounts for it. She is a Calvinist, no doubt; but I do hope she won't talk religion,' said Brenda.

'But, I say, what about the hockey? Are you putting her into the House team?' inquired Alice anxiously.

'Well, I can't very well avoid it, since she's far and away the best since the Newmans have gone.'

'What a shame!' began Alice.

'And since she is to play in the school team,' continued Davidine quietly.

That settled it. Some were pleased that another Lorne girl should play for the school; others were a little jealous; but the matter had been settled by wiser heads than theirs, and they had nothing to do but to submit to the decision of the games committee.

CHAPTER XV.

SCHOOL-LIFE.

THE first day, which had begun so badly, ended quite peacefully, and both Katherine —whose headache and indisposition, about which nobody made any inquiries, was forgotten even by herself—and Brenda awaited next morning's post with impatience.

'A letter for you, Katherine,' said Miss Caruthers at breakfast the next morning, at which both the new girls had appeared at the proper time.

Katherine took the letter eagerly, and tore it open to see what explanation her mother gave of her non-appearance yesterday. Brenda, glancing at Katherine from the other side of the table, tried to read from her face whether the news was satisfactory or not.

A wave of conflicting feelings was shown on the girl's sensitive and expressive face—first bewilderment, then annoyance, and finally a look of disappointment and sadness.

Brenda was conscious of a feeling of relief. Then Katherine was not going to be taken away, and the reflection this would be on Lorne House and its attractiveness was avoided, to say nothing of the annoyance to Miss Dolling. Still, she felt for Katherine's disappointment, and when breakfast

was over, waited for her and said, 'Won't you come for a mouthful of fresh air before we go into school? You are to be in my form, I hear; so we can go together. We have a splendid mistress—she makes her subjects so interesting.'

'Alice says she is very severe,' observed Katherine, who was inclined at this minute to look on the dark side of things.

'Oh, Alice,' began Brenda in a tone of contempt. 'You mustn't go by Alice; she's as lazy as she can be here. But you will find a very nice set of girls in our form, and you will enjoy school if you are going to stay, as I hope you are.'

Brenda said this to give Katherine a chance of telling her about her disappointment, if she chose, for Brenda guessed it would be a relief to her mind; and it had the desired effect.

'I think so—at least I suppose so; but I can't understand it. I wrote to mamma yesterday morning early, and she ought to have got the letter by lunch-time; but she never mentions it, and says, on the contrary, that the house is so dull without me that she and papa are going motoring to the north of Scotland to stay with some friends, so that she will not see me for a month. I can't understand it. She can't have got the letter, for mamma always does what I want,' said Katherine.

Brenda thought to herself that it was a very good thing this spoilt child had come to school,

and that the pity was that she had come so late. 'Did you get special leave to write yesterday? Because, if not, the letter won't go till Sunday,' she remarked.

'I didn't exactly get leave; but I told my aunt, and she said she had seen the letter and put it in the post,' said Katherine.

'Then it must have gone; but as a rule all letters are put in the post-box, and that is cleared on Sunday,' explained Brenda.

'Oh! that's what my aunt meant, then,' cried Katherine as a light dawned upon her. For a moment she felt very angry and as if she had been tricked; then, to her surprise, she began to be glad, since the letter had not gone, that she was going to stay for a term at least, and not vex her aunt, of whom she was really very fond. And now that she had met a good many of the girls, and found them very pleasant—especially the Lorne House girls, except Alice and Winifred—and since Alistair seemed to be getting on, she was more reconciled to three months at Nun's Eaton.

Moreover, the greatest difficulty, a maid's attention, seemed to be disappearing. Somehow, Mary the packing-maid seemed always just to happen to be there when she was struggling with her hair or toilet, and would say, 'You haven't quite learnt to do your hair yet; let me show you;' or, 'You are not quite tidy; let me help you.'

So with resignation Katherine went off to her

form with a packet of books under her arm, and sat beside Alice and Brenda, who were the only two Lorne girls in her form, it being etiquette to keep as much as possible to one's House girls, and passed a very satisfactory and not unpleasant morning at lessons, and came back to dinner with a bright colour and a better appetite than she ever had at home.

They were caught up on their way to Lorne House by Winifred, who was a chum of Alice's. 'Hi, there!' she shouted.

The three Fifth Form girls stopped for her to come up to them, which she did breathless.

'I say, we've had such a shine as never was in the Fourth this morning.'

'What happened? Miss Crowther always does seem to have shines in her form; she doesn't seem to have any idea of keeping discipline,' said Brenda. 'I wonder Miss Dolling keeps her.'

'Miss Dolling doesn't know half that goes on in the school.—Oh! I didn't see you,' she added as she caught sight of Katherine.

'It doesn't matter; I shall not repeat what you say to my aunt,' said Katherine rather coldly.

'Oh, I didn't suppose you would; but—well, never mind. It isn't very interesting;' and Winifred said no more.

'Don't be so stupid, Winnie. What did happen? You've aroused our curiosity, and now you must just gratify it,' said the curious Alice.

'I can't,' said Winifred, making a sign with her head towards Katherine.

Brenda guessed what she meant, and walked on with Katherine, while Alice dropped behind with Winifred, whose voice they heard eagerly relating some tale which seemed to interest Alice much, and at times amuse her.

Arrived at Lorne House, they found Alistair standing in the hall, where the girls were waiting for dinner, leaning up against the doorpost and gazing far out to the woods.

'Have you had a nice morning, Alistair?' inquired Brenda.

Alistair turned to the speaker, and the far-away look left her eyes as she knitted her brows. 'I can't say exactly. There was a little trouble between the other girls and myself, but it wasn't altogether a bad morning, and the gymnastics were just fine,' she said.

'What was the trouble, Alistair?' inquired Davidine, who came up at that moment. She had heard fragments of conversation, and as she never listened to tales behind people's backs, she came straight to the person whose name seemed to be in every one's mouth.

'Oh, it was no trouble at all to do those exercises in the gymnasium,' replied Alistair, who was full of the gymnasium now, and had forgotten her trouble with the other lasses.

'I know all about that. Fröken, the Swedish

drill-mistress, is delighted to find a congenial spirit who is as much at home at the top of a rope as on the ground. But I want to know what happened in school,' demanded Davidine, putting her hand in a friendly way on Alistair's arm.

'It was just like this. The girls were all baiting the mistress, as you call her, and I called out, "Will you hold your peace, you mean girls, setting twenty of you on one?" And then they set on me and called me a wild savage, and I laughed, and that made them wild; and we're all to go to Miss Dolling this afternoon.'

A queer expression came into Davidine's eyes. 'What did Miss Crowther say?' she asked.

'She's no good as a teacher,' replied Alistair candidly, not meaning to be impudent at all.

'She has passed no end of exams.,' observed Brenda.

'She may have; but her class—form you call it—is a bear-garden and a disgrace in a girls' school, and those girls ought to be ashamed to behave as they do to a puir woman,' announced Alistair, who said all this quite calmly, without any heat. She did not seem to be angry with her schoolfellows. She simply disapproved of their behaviour, and she had told them so.

Davidine was rather surprised that Alistair did not feel uncomfortable at having roused her schoolfellows' anger; and after dinner, when Katherine and Alistair were talking together, she remarked to Brenda upon the Scotch girl's indifference.

'Yes, she was so hurt when they laughed at her jig the other night; and to-day she defies them all and keeps as cool as a cucumber,' agreed Brenda.

'Well, we shall see who was in the right of it when they have all reported themselves to Miss Dolling. It isn't often a new girl is reported her first day of school,' said Davidine.

'No; and no one but Miss Crowther would do such a thing. Alistair is right; she is not fit to be a teacher,' observed Brenda.

'I wonder whether she will tell Miss Dolling that. I should like to see her face if she does,' said Davidine with a laugh.

But the Lower Fifth were not laughing at the thought of the interview before them, and were very angry with Alistair for having put the finishing-spark to Miss Crowther's wrath, and made her send them to report themselves.

'We weren't doing anything,' declared one of the girls—'not any more than usual, anyhow. We always have jinks in Miss Crowther's form, and she does not mind as a rule; it was all that interfering Alistair that did the mischief.'

'Never mind, girls; we'll pay her out. I've got a fine idea in my head,' said Winifred, as she, with the rest of the form (for they were all ordered to report themselves), walked across the grounds to the glass study, where Miss Dolling, a tall, dignified figure, sat at her table, with her secretary opposite her.

Alistair walked there with them; at least she was on the outskirts of the party, for no one would walk with her; noticing which, Alistair walked a little apart, her head erect, her step springy as on her native heather; her hair, in spite of the regulation plait in which she had done it up, standing out like a great halo round her head.

When they arrived at the glass door, in which, being of looking-glass, they saw their faces reflected, the girls paused, each composing her features into what she thought would be a suitable expression of mingled regret and injured innocence, and then waited for some one to knock.

But this being no one's particular duty, it was left undone, and Alistair's voice was suddenly raised. 'Are we not going in?' she demanded.

They suddenly turned upon her. 'As it's your fault our being here at all, you'd better go in first,' said Winifred angrily. She did not really mean Alistair to act upon this hasty remark, and the others certainly did not wish a new girl to show the way in.

But Alistair took Winifred at her word, and saying, 'Certainly I'll go first,' before any one had time to stop her she knocked lightly at the door and stepped in.

'Winnie, how could you?' 'You've done it now, Winnie! What will Miss Dolling think of us?' was hastily whispered on every side as the girls hurried in after Alistair.

CHAPTER XVI.

AN UNPLEASANT INTERVIEW.

THE little crowd making their way to the Head-mistress's study had not been unnoticed by the rest of the school, for their gait was so unlike the brisk, purposeful walk of girls going to the school, or the light, swinging step of the hockey-girl. It was evidently a 'reported' step, and if there had been one girl, or even two, would have attracted no attention; but a whole form!

Even the Sixth, who were above gossip and noticing what the smaller fry did—for the Sixth had authority over the younger ones—stopped to look at the group and commented to each other upon this wholesale reporting. 'Poor Miss Crowther, she can't tackle her crew at all,' observed one, with a half-scornful pity.

'But to report them at the beginning of term—it's a bad way to start,' remarked another girl; and then, it being no business of theirs, they walked on and talked about other things; those of them who had Lower Fifth girls in their House over whom they were monitors deciding later on to give these same girls a talking to, and thereby help poor, weak Miss Crowther.

Miss Dolling looked up gravely as Alistair entered the room, and a shade of surprise passed over her

face. 'You, Alistair? Oh, I see there are others,' she remarked; and the girls knew by her voice that she was surprised that Alistair should head the Lower Fifth.

'Yes, Miss Dolling, I am very sorry to say we are all reported, as they call it, because we annoyed Miss Crowther this morning, and they think it is my fault; so I came to tell you so,' said Alistair.

Miss Dolling turned to the head-girl of the Fifth, who had been three years in the school. 'I will hear what you have done from you, Milicent,' she said gravely.

'We were rather foolish, Miss Dolling. The lesson was not very interesting, and we made rather stupid answers and vexed Miss Crowther, and she told us to report ourselves,' said the girl called Milicent, who, it will be noticed, did not put any blame upon Alistair or mention her at all.

'After three years at Nun's Eaton do you think that was worthy of you—you, who as the head of your form should show a good example and have a good influence upon the others?' said Miss Dolling quietly to Milicent; and then addressing them all, she continued: 'You have an exceedingly able and well-educated—in fact, learned—lady to teach you, who naturally does not expect to have to waste precious time in making big girls in their teens behave rationally, instead of behaving in a way worthy of babies in the kindergarten. If I hear any

more complaints the form will be moved down, and another, more capable of appreciating the advantages than you appear to be, will take your place.' Then Miss Dolling bent her head over her papers as a sign that the interview was at an end, and the girls slunk out.

Milicent, looking straight before her, walked out of the study and through the long palm-house which led into the big house, and the girls followed her down the corridor to their form-room, where Miss Crowther, who was due to give another lesson, was sitting, feeling, if the truth be known, very unhappy at her want of discipline and failure to get the girls' attention and respect.

'I thought Miss Dolling would have taken our part,' muttered Winifred as they walked along. 'It's twenty against one; we can't all be wrong.'

'You don't know Miss Dolling; she always sticks up for her staff; it's her idea of loyalty. Besides, we were in the wrong for fooling like that,' replied the other.

Meanwhile Milicent, who this time headed the procession, walked silently along, and opening the door of the Lower Fifth, went straight up to Miss Crowther, and standing before her, said, 'We are very sorry for having behaved so badly, and hope you will forgive us; and we mean to behave properly in the future.'

The rest of the form were a little taken aback by this apology in their name, but not one of them

dared to say a word to the contrary, though they were not quite sure that they liked it.

Miss Crowther looked up with a bright smile and said, 'Thank you, Milicent; I am very glad to hear it, for there is so much to learn in this world, and so little time to do it, that it is too terrible to think of your wasting it as you have done. Now, this period of history is most fascinating; it is really more interesting than a novel if you take the trouble to study it and the characters of its great men, and see the steady development of science, art, industries, and public character.' Miss Crowther was so interested and animated that she went on for ten minutes, drawing so true a picture of the time she was treating that the girls listened open-mouthed. The mistress had never let herself go like that before.

Suddenly she caught herself up. 'I forgot I was not lecturing to grown-up people,' she said half-apologetically.

The girls, who had been standing all this time, slipped into their seats.

'It's fine,' said Alistair. 'I can see it all.'

But Milicent was not going to let Alistair lead any more, and broke in: 'We quite understood Miss Crowther though we are not grown up, and I think we shall all understand that part of history better now.'

There was such complete silence in the Lower Fifth room that Davidine and Brenda, on their

way to the bookbinding shop at the end of the corridor, where they were learning this art, listened for a moment as they passed the door.

'What has happened?' queried Brenda. 'I can't imagine unless they are all asleep, or Miss Crowther, in a moment of mental aberration, is lecturing to empty benches.' She ceased to listen, and then continued: 'It would be a pity if she were, for she is giving a most interesting view of that episode.'

But the two Sixth Form girls had no time to waste on the Lower Fifth and its doings, and hurried on to the bookbinding workshop, where the one took out a beautiful book-cover that she was designing for a favourite author, and the other a pair of leather slippers which she was making for her father.

'Hallo, Lower Fifth, what iniquities have you been up to? You ought to be ashamed of yourselves, disgracing the Upper School like that!' said half-chaffingly a pert member of the Lower School when she met three of the Lower Fifth Form coming out of their form.

The three Upper School girls took no notice of the gibe, and went on to the different games-grounds.

But that was not the end of the comments on this affair. Alice, who had taken a violent dislike to Alistair, declared that the whole thing was the fault of the Scotch girl. 'If there's one thing I hate, it's cant,' she declared.

'She doesn't mean it as cant,' objected Brenda.

'Nobody means it as cant; but it's very objectionable and bad form to go talking religion and using holy names like that in common conversation,' persisted Alice.

The Lorne House girls had not seen Winifred and Alistair, so did not know of the result of the visit to the Head-mistress's study, and were, to tell the truth, a little curious to know what had happened.

'That stuck-up Milicent went and ate humble-pie to Miss Crowther, and she gave us a most learned lecture, which the girls pretended to like; though I don't believe they understood half of it,' declared Winifred.

'Oh, but it was fine,' said Alistair, who was standing near.

'We weren't speaking to you. Please to keep your opinion to yourself till you're asked for it,' said Alice rudely.

Alistair looked surprised, and, flushing, said, 'I beg your pardon,' and moved away.

'She wants snubbing; if we don't take care she will turn Lorne House into a mad Methody chapel.'

'The Methodists are not mad,' objected Winifred.

'No; but Alistair Comyns is,' said Alice.

Winifred looked at the elder girl to see what she meant, but could not decide whether she was joking or not. 'What do you mean?' she asked.

'What I say,' said Alice.

'Do you really mean that Alistair Comyns is—is not all right?' inquired Winifred.

'I think she's got religious mania. Look at the way she keeps dragging in religion; and then that reel, or whatever she called it, which she danced upon the table that first night.'

Winifred was not a very bright girl, and she was a very weak one, and the friendship of a Sixth Form girl, which was very rarely bestowed upon a Lower Fifth girl, flattered her. She listened to this speech with much concern. A little common-sense would have told her that dancing a native reel was no sign of mania, religious or otherwise, but of an unconventional bringing up in the country, far from civilisation; but Winifred was not blest with much common-sense, and a confused remembrance of tales of dervishes and such fanatics, who cut themselves and danced wildly in a religious frenzy, came into her mind. And Alistair had played with the knives and forks on the table, and said that she ought to have two swords to dance upon (between was Alistair's remark, but such a detail was of no consequence). It was all too clear. Alice was quite right; the new Scotch girl was evidently suffering from religious mania.

'How dreadful!' Winifred said at last. 'I shall be afraid to go near her.'

'Oh, she's not dangerous,' observed Alice, not

wishing to go too far. 'But I should keep out of her way; such people are very annoying, and they are always trying to preach to you.'

It happened most unfortunately at this moment that the partners for the walks had to be re-arranged. The girls went for a weekly walk in parties of four, under the charge of an Upper School girl—generally of the Upper or Lower Sixth. These walks were very often half-arranged before the girls left for the holidays, when one or the other would say, 'We'll take the first walk together to such-and-such a place when we come back;' and then, if one of the parties was late in returning—which happened through illness or other unforeseen accident even at Miss Dolling's well-regulated school—the others would leave a walk or two vacant for her.

Alice had left three walks vacant for her friend the elder Newman, and had induced Winifred, who was her companion on these occasions, to do the same for the younger Newman; and now the two found themselves free for the second walk, and Davidine came up to them and suggested their taking Katherine and Alistair.

'I don't mind Katherine, but I draw the line at Alistair,' declared Alice.

'You can't leave her out if you ask her cousin. Besides, why should you? She is a very nice girl, and they will only be tails, though she is a little odd.'

'We don't want odd girls to walk with us,' said Winifred hastily.

'She is not odd to look at, and she and Katherine will walk on together, so they won't bother you at all,' said Davidine, walking away quite unconscious that her unlucky use of the word 'odd' had been misunderstood by Winifred, who thought she saw in it a confirmation of Alice's statement.

'I don't want her on our walk even as tail,' said Winifred, half-frightened as a matter of fact.

'We can't get out of it, I'm afraid. But never mind, we'll soon get rid of them; we'll lose them at the beginning of Cowsly Wood, and only find them to come home with, and you and I will have a jolly walk alone,' Alice consoled her; and she went to Katherine to invite her to join their walking party.

It should be explained that the two elder girls were called the 'heads' of the walking-party, and the two younger ones the tails, the latter being expected to walk behind their seniors.

Katherine was rather flattered by Alice's compliments, and accepted with alacrity. She was no judge of character, and she did not even dislike Winifred, of whom the other girls rather fought shy.

Alistair, on the contrary, was a shrewd observer; she had learnt much from her life at Craigie with nature and the peasants, and she said bluntly to her cousin, 'I am very sorry that we are going

to walk with those two girls; I mislike them both.'

'Oh, they are all right; and, anyway, we have no choice — all the other parties are full,' said Katherine, as she prepared for her first walk.

CHAPTER XVII

ALICE AND ALISTAIR.

LITTLE groups of blue-cloaked girls stood about in the different cloak-rooms or at the hall-door waiting for some laggard to arrive and complete their walking-party. In the hall of Lorne House stood Alice, Winifred, and Alistair, who stood a little distance off from her two walk-companions.

'Where is Katherine?' Winifred asked Alice, and then looked at Alistair, whom she did not choose to address directly, though it would have seemed the simpler plan, seeing that it was her cousin who was missing.

Alistair, for her part, was no more anxious to talk to these two particular girls than they were to talk to her; but she overheard this remark, and replied, 'I don't know. Shall I go and see?'

'No; you wouldn't know where to look for her,' replied Alice brusquely, and went off herself.

In the study she found Katherine sitting reading in the one comfortable chair in the room, sacred, if she had but known it, to the monitors.

'What on earth are you doing? Don't you know it's walk-time and that we're waiting for you?' demanded Alice in rather rude tones. She was annoyed, first, at having been kept waiting, and, secondly, at

seeing Katherine sitting in that chair; and her manners at the best of times were not too good.

Katherine, who was engrossed in a book of new poems which her fond mother had sent from town as a parting gift before her departure north, looked up from her reading with a look of surprise at the tone. 'I am sorry; I forgot all about the walk'—— she began; but Alice did not wait for the completion of her sentence.

'Then hurry up and get ready now; you've kept us waiting about an hour as it is,' she said crossly.

'I am not going, thank you,' said Katherine coldly.

'Not going? Why not, pray? Have you a cold? And have you had leave to stay at home?' inquired Alice, who, being a monitor, had a perfect right to ask the question; though she might have made her demand more civilly.

'I don't care to go out in this rain,' replied Katherine, still more coldly, and went on reading.

Alice was furious at this calm ignoring of her authority, and was just going to order Katherine to come, which she also had a right to do, but she felt pretty sure that she would not be obeyed. Without a word, she marched back into the hall, and said to Davidine, who with Brenda and two younger girls, was just starting, 'Here, Davidine, that new girl, Katherine Kerr, is coolly sitting in the study arm-chair reading a silly book, and won't go for a walk because it's raining.'

Davidine guessed that Alice, as usual, had been rude in her way of speaking, and went at once to Katherine. 'I thought perhaps I had better tell you that it is against the rule of the school to stay at home unless one is ill,' she said pleasantly.

Katherine looked annoyed. 'But it is raining,' she objected, looking out of the window.

Davidine laughed. 'We don't take any notice of rain here; these wide cloaks cover us up down to our feet, and we put the hoods over our sailor hats so'—she suited the action to the word—'and nothing but our noses can get wet; but of course if you have had special leave, it is different.'

'No, I have had no leave; I will get it another time; so I suppose I had better go to-day,' said Katherine, getting up slowly.

'Yes; I should. And, by the way, that chair is for monitors' use only,' said Davidine.

Katherine took no notice, and in ten minutes—by which time all the walking-parties had started, and Alice and Winifred were fuming with impatience—Katherine, looking very dignified and nun-like in her dark-blue cloak, with the hood pulled over her sailor hat, appeared.

'Come on,' said Alice to Winifred, and they both started at a brisk rate for the park-gates, without taking any further notice of the two new girls.

Once out of the park-gates, they turned briskly up the hill for the wood which was at the top,

ignoring the school etiquette by which one generally consulted new girls as to which way one should go for the first walk.

'What a good thing it is that those two have gone off by themselves! They would have spoilt our walk,' observed Alistair as she threw back her head and let the rain fall on it and drew a long breath, and added, 'Isn't it lovely and fresh?'

'It's a horrid, pouring wet day, and I should never think of going out in it at home, except in the car,' said Katherine, drawing her cloak round her and bending down her head.

'Ah! you are not used to the country; I do pity you. But see, we are going through this wood, and you will be sheltered from the rain,' said Alistair to console her.

But Katherine did not want pity, and looked with dismay at the sopping woodland path, which was a walk generally avoided by the school on a day like this. 'I never heard of such folly, tramping through mire like this. Why, it's impossible. Look! the path is flooded. I don't believe those girls can have gone this way at all!' she cried, after they had gone through the wood some way and come to a bit which was under water.

But Alistair was not a Highlander for nothing. 'Yes, they have. They are over there,' she said, pointing in front of them, 'and they came this way; see, here are footmarks.' And by means of the marks she took Katherine a drier way, till, a

hundred yards ahead, they came upon a little hut, and opening the door, she said, 'Here they are.'

'Oh-h! How on earth did you find us?' said foolish Winifred, before Alice had time to stop her.

'Were you hiding, then? I didn't know this was to be a game of hide-and-seek; I imagined you were taking us for a walk. But, since I was mistaken, we will not trouble you any further for your guidance.—Come, Alistair, let us find a pleasanter way home than these girls have led us,' said Katherine in her haughtiest tones.

'Nonsense! Can't you take a joke, Katherine?' said Alice, who felt that this one had gone far enough. 'Come on, we'll show you some ruins of an old castle about half a mile farther on;' and Alice frowned at Winifred, who was smiling in a silly way.

'No, thank you,' began Katherine coldly.

But Alistair interposed. 'Yes, Katherine, let us go and see the ruins; it is our duty to keep with these two.'

Winifred gave a frightened look at Alice, as much as to say, 'She's beginning with her religious manner again.'

Alistair caught the look, and interpreted it to mean that Winifred was afraid her *tête-à-tête* was to be interrupted, and continued: 'You need not worry about keeping us in sight; I shall know where you are.'

'How?' inquired Winifred, who thought this was another of Alistair's odd ways.

Alistair laughed gaily. The fresh air raised her spirits. 'Quite easily; I am used to stalking wild beasts, you must remember.'

'Wild beasts?' repeated Winifred stupidly.

But Alice pulled her cloak. 'Come along; what's the good of wasting our time in a stuffy little hut half walk-time?' she said, and marched ahead, throwing a remark over her shoulder every now and then at the cousins, who were following.

'That's all very fine, Alice; but what did she mean by comparing us to wild beasts?' said Winifred when, on their return, having changed their boots and got into dry shoes, they were standing near the study fire.

'She didn't. She only said she could "stalk" us as she did the beasts in Scotland,' said Alice.

'Like people do with bloodhounds? How horrid!' said Winifred, shuddering. 'She must have some horrid power to have found us out as she did. Some mad people are very cunning.'

'Don't be silly; she can't hurt us,' said Alice hastily. Alice was beginning to feel an uncomfortable doubt as to whether she were wise to fall foul of Alistair, who somehow got the best of one, and with her dislike there mingled a fear of this new girl, who was so unlike most girls. She decided to give her as wide a berth as possible; but Alice's bad temper and dislike of Alistair prevented her saying honestly to Winifred that there was nothing horrid or odd in the Highland girl seeing and hear-

ing farther than townsfolk, nor in her being able to trace them as she had done. Perhaps Alice rather wished that Alistair should be shunned and thought 'queer' by the girls, especially if it could be done without her being mixed up in it. So she let Winifred think what she liked about Alistair instead of, as she ought to have done, putting her right.

At this moment, however, there seemed no chance of Alistair being shunned, in spite of her oddness, which was a kind of oddness which amused the girls; for Alice heard her voice relating something or another, and the circle round her grew bigger and bigger.

'Oh, it's only just a tale they tell in the north I was telling to Katherine, who is poetical and likes such things,' she protested.

'Oh, are you poetical? Do you write poetry?' cried some of the girls, turning to Katherine.

'No,' said Katherine, flushing hotly; for her essays in poetry were her most cherished secret, only told to her mother, and discovered by chance by her cousin, to whom she had repeated some verses about the Highlands, which, though not very good, delighted Alistair because of the subject; and, in a moment of what she now felt was weakness, Katherine, when asked who had written such beautiful lines, owned to their authorship.

Alistair turned round when Katherine's prompt

'No' came out, and she stared at her in amazement, and then became quite white.

Katherine was not looking at Alistair; she was looking at the book of poems she had in her hand, and said, 'I am very fond of poetry, if that is being poetical.'

Poor Katherine, she was not by any means an untruthful girl; in fact, she had never knowingly told a falsehood in her life, and would not have done so now but that she was taken by surprise, and she tried to persuade herself that it was not an intentional lie, for she meant that she could not write poetry at Nun's Eaton. But her qualification that she liked poetry made it worse, not better. When she looked up again and saw Alistair's averted and pale face, she felt a sudden pang, and the impulse to tell the truth came upon her. She raised her eyes to the girls, but their amused faces at seeing her reading poetry she took for mockery, and her heart failed her. With a laugh, she said, 'But I like other books as well. You see, I have never had a brother or sister, so I had to make friends with books, or I should have been quite alone.' Katherine could quite easily have added, 'And I have scribbled rhymes too, but I don't like talking about it, please,' and that would have ended the matter and been the truth. But her courage failed her, and she left the explanation unmade, and, strange to say, a kind of anger against her cousin took hold of her.

'Tell us the tale, too, Alistair,' said the girls, repelled, they did not know why, by Katherine's manner, which was not frank or sincere.

Alistair's eyes took on their far-away look, and she began: 'I see blue hills far away in the distance, and before me and beneath my feet is the purple heather, and the smell of the peat is in my nostrils. Not a sound but the cry of the curlew or the wind in the bracken is to be heard. But now, hark! there comes to my ears the echo of a horse's hoofs, and there, over the brow of the hill, comes a lonely horseman, who stands and looks around him in dumb perplexity. For there is no road to be seen nor moorland track visible to the eyes of a southron, and there is no inhabitant of the moors to be seen from whom information might be had. And then in front of him, out of the ground as it seems, comes the thin blue smoke of a peat fire; and the horseman, looking startled before him, sees within a few inches of his horse's feet a wee, wee opening in the turf, and knows now why the beast stopped short and would not go on. It was the roof of a cave, just hollowed out of the side of the hill, scarce showing from above; but if he had trodden upon it, it must have crashed in and sent him headlong down the hill, while the dweller in the cave must have been killed.

'"The Lord be praised!"' he said, taking off his hat, "for the instinct He has given the beasts; and

praised be His name again that He has sent a human being to tell me my way." So saying, he dismounted from his horse, and leading it by the bridle, he came to the front of the cave, and then started back in affright, for the veriest old hag stood at the opening, the door of which was formed by twisted heather.'

'What rubbish is she talking there?' came from Alice in loud, sarcastic tones.

Alistair gave a start, and a shy, ashamed look came over her face. 'It's just the people's tales, but it's not very interesting,' she said.

The girls had listened spell-bound; Alistair was acting it all, and spoke in such dramatic tones; and they turned angrily to Alice, and then begged Alistair to proceed.

But the girl shook her head. 'I cannot; it's gone from me now. Perhaps another wild day like this I'll try again,' she told them; for the evening had become very stormy, and the wind was howling round and the rain beating on the windows.

'I believe she's quite daft. That tale was getting quite uncanny,' declared Winifred.

Alice did not contradict her.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN UNCOMFORTABLE RIDE.

'YOU are to have your first ride this afternoon, Alistair,' Miss Caruthers said one morning at breakfast.

'Oh, that will be fine!' cried Alistair, beaming.

'Then you had better tell them that you will not be here for lacrosse,' said Alice, turning to Katherine Kerr as they left the room; for Katherine, being obliged to play some game, had chosen lacrosse.

'I? Why not?' inquired Katherine.

'Won't you come to ride?' Alice inquired. 'Of course you ride?'

'I have not made any arrangements; I did not know anything about it,' said Katherine, looking annoyed, for from Alice's tone riding was evidently a desirable accomplishment, and Katherine had never been on horseback in her life, chiefly because she shirked all outdoor exercise, and preferred to dream over a book of poetry, or write what she was pleased to call poetry herself.

'Why did you not tell your cousin, Alistair? I call it rather mean to go and arrange to have a ride by yourself.—But it does not matter, Katherine; I 'll put that right. You sha'n't miss a gallop this glorious morning,' said Alice, and, with a nod to

Katherine, she went off to the mistress who arranged the rides.

Alistair had taken no notice of Alice's remarks; she disliked and mistrusted the girl instinctively. But she did like Katherine, and made many attempts to be friendly, without success; and she went up to her cousin now and said, 'I did not make any arrangements about riding; I only wrote and asked mother and father if I might, and they must have cabled back to Miss Dolling. It is a great surprise to me; I shall have to unpack my habit—I have not even unpacked it yet.'

'You need not excuse yourself. As a matter of fact, I have no habit, so I could not ride this morning,' said Katherine, 'if you had told me.'

'Oh, that doesn't matter; I have a blue one as well as a gray one, and, indeed, they are both new, for, to tell you the truth, I went out in my everyday dress as often as not at Craigie; so you can have one—we are much the same size,' cried Alistair eagerly.

'No, thank you,' said Katherine, who did not want to ride, and was beginning to feel very frightened now that it came to the point.

But Alistair did not stop to listen; she was too delighted at the chance of being able to give Katherine pleasure and show her that she really wished to be friendly to her. So she took no notice of Katherine's refusal, thinking it was her pride and perhaps a little shame at the way she

had treated her, and ran off to get out the two habits that they might be ready for the afternoon.

Then the two went their different ways, to their different forms and lessons, and Alistair saw no more of her cousin till dinner-time, when she was at one end of the table and Katherine at the other.

'It's all right, Katherine; put your name down for the ride. I've seen about a horse for you, and you are going to have a lovely mare that I used to ride last year, and your cousin is just out of it,' Alice said in an undertone to Katherine.

'Do you mean that Alistair is not going, and that I have taken her horse? Because if so, I would rather not,' said Katherine, who saw in this a chance of getting out of the dreaded ride with dignity.

'Oh dear, no; she's going all right, or all wrong, for my part, as I don't care for her to ride with. I hope you don't mind my saying this, but I can't think how two cousins can be so unlike; you are so nice,' said Alice, and had the tact not to add, 'and she is so nasty.'

Katherine liked the flattery and smiled, and began to console herself about the ride, for just at this minute Miss Caruthers began to speak about the riding lesson, so no doubt it would be all right. One had to begin to learn some time, and she did not suppose it was very difficult. She made up her mind to tell the riding-master that it was her first ride.

'Is it a quiet horse?' she asked Alice.

'Of course; they never send any but very safe horses for us; and I hope you won't mind, but the riding-master always starts a new rider with a leading-rein till he sees how she manages a new horse,' replied Alice.

'I would rather that he did,' said Katherine, and she was very near adding that it was her first ride, but Alice did not give her time, monopolising most of the conversation herself.

There was no getting out of this dreadful ride into which her pride had led her, and when the riding-party of Lorne House, consisting of Alice, Winifred, and Alistair, went up to the cubicles to put on their riding-habits, Katherine went with them, her heart sinking as she heard the others laughing together.

'I shall make Williams take us across country and do some jumping,' said Alice to Winifred.

'Do you jump?' inquired Winifred of Alistair.

'Yes; my little pony was a good jumper,' said Alistair.

'Have you only ridden a pony?' demanded Alice suddenly with some scorn; and as Alistair did not answer at once, she continued: 'Perhaps you won't be able to manage a horse; you had better tell the riding-master.'

'I shall get on all right if the horse has no vices,' said Alistair indifferently.

'She can't ride,' said Alice contemptuously. 'But

we won't have our ride spoilt by her; we'll just leave her to jog along with the groom.'

'Oh, but I think she can,' put in Winifred, to whom Alistair had told a little of her Highland life. 'She says she can.'

'She thinks she can do anything,' declared Alice.

They had arrived at their cubicles, and here a difficulty arose; Katherine did not in the least understand how to arrange her habit, which was a safety one. She took it up, and looked at it in dismay; it seemed such an odd shape, and how to put it on she did not know.

'Can I help you?' said a voice at the opening, and Katherine saw Alistair standing there ready dressed.

'I don't think it will fit me,' objected Katherine.

'That was what I came to see about; I thought it might be a little too big in the waist, because you are smaller than I am; let me pin it for you,' said Alistair.

As it happened, no pinning was necessary, and Alistair arranged the habit without having the slightest idea that it was the first time Katherine had ever donned such a garment, and that it would be the first time she had mounted a horse.

They went downstairs together, Alistair as usual running lightly down, when there was a sound of a stumble, a cry, and down fell Katherine on to Alistair.

'What on earth happened to you?' cried Alice, coming forward.

'I beg your pardon; I hope I did not hurt you?' said Katherine to her cousin.

'Not a bit, thank you. What a good thing you were near the bottom of the stairs! How did you fall?' replied Alistair.

'I caught my foot in this skirt; I don't think it's properly made,' said Katherine rather irritably.

'It's all right; you're not holding it properly—that's what is the matter,' said Alice. But even then it never struck her that Katherine knew no more about riding-habits than horses.

'Oh, you beauty!' cried Alistair, going up to one of the horses that stood in a group waiting for their young riders, with a stableman at their heads.

The riding-master looked pleased. 'You are a good judge of horse-flesh, miss; I've won many a prize with Lights Out.'

'Lights Out! What a funny name!' cried Alistair.

'Yes, miss, it is. We call him so because he likes the lights out in the stable. He's a fine one to go, but you must not touch his neck; he can't stand it. That's why I never give him to a new rider; he's ticklish to manage.'

'I'll promise not to touch his neck if you give him to me,' cried Alistair, as she stroked Lights Out's nose.

'Well, I meant him for Miss Alice,' began the riding-master doubtfully.

'I don't want him; give him to Miss Comyns if

she says she can manage him. I'll ride Levengro,' said Alice, who had taken it into her head that Alistair could not ride—except a small pony—and thought she would make an exhibition of her ignorance; and Alice mounted the favourite horse in Williams's stables, a beautiful thoroughbred which, as he told them, had won the Grand National.

'Thank you,' said Alistair, and vaulted lightly on to Lights Out's back.

Unfortunately Alice's back was turned at this moment, so that she did not see this feat, at which the riding-master opened his eyes, and Winifred gave a gasp of admiration; if she had, her eyes might have been opened to Alistair's riding abilities, and she would not have behaved as she did on the ride. Nor did she see the difficulty Katherine had in getting mounted, even with the stableman's aid. Alistair, on the contrary, did see it, and in a flash she guessed the truth.

'Have you ever ridden a horse before, Katherine?' she asked suddenly.

'Please mind your own business, Alistair,' said Katherine coldly. Now that she was mounted, she felt no fear; moreover, the groom had told her the horse was as safe as a lamb, and all she had to do was to sit straight and hold the reins right, and he placed them in her hands.

The riding-master kept the two new riders, one on each side of him, with a leading-rein till they were outside the park-gates; but by that time his

practised eye had seen that Alistair was quite at home on Lights Out, whereas Katherine was evidently a novice. 'You can ride ahead with the other two young ladies, if you like, miss.—But I think you had better keep with me, Miss Kerr,' he said to his two pupils.

'I should like a gallop, if you don't mind my leaving you?' said Alistair to her cousin.

'Not in the least; pray go on,' replied Katherine.

So Alistair cantered ahead, past the other two, stopping at the top of the hill.

'She sits well,' said Winifred, looking after her with admiration.

'Any one can do that who is used to being on horseback. Katherine tells me she spent hours wandering about the moors on her little pony; but she can't ride. See how cautious she is,' observed Alice.

By this time Katherine had come up to them, and the riding-master dismounted to do something to Winnie's saddle, which she had declared was not comfortable.

How it happened the poor man could not tell, for he thought he had Katherine's lead over his arm, but there was a sudden rearing of horses, and in a moment Katherine's and Alistair's horses had broken away and were careering wildly up the hill.

Katherine gave a shriek, which only frightened her horse the more, and clung to the pommels for

a few yards; but it was evident that she would be off in a moment.

Poor Williams, the riding-master, mounted and went after them, muttering something between his teeth. Alistair was sitting tight and had her steed in hand, and try as he might to get rid of her he could not. But it was not her own safety that was troubling Alistair; it was her cousin's. She wanted to get near enough to her to steady her, but Lights Out was plunging too much for her to dare.

At last Katherine, in despair, clutched at her horse's mane. It was too much for the excited brute; it reared and threw her, and would have fallen on her, but Alistair, by a clever manœuvre, caught at its bridle and pulled it towards her, and the riding-master, coming up at the instant, quieted it, while Alistair slipped off Lights Out and ran to her cousin.

Mercifully, Katherine had fallen upon grass at the side of the road, and now sat up, looking very much shaken, but apparently none the worse for her fall.

'Thank God for that, miss!' said Williams, reverently raising his hat; and then addressing Alistair, he said sternly, 'What made you hit Lights Out on the neck, miss? I warned you he would not stand his neck touched, but otherwise he was as quiet as you could wish. I have never had an accident with the young ladies before, and I wouldn't have had it happen for a hundred pounds.'

'I never used my whip at all,' said Alistair, looking the man full in the face, and then she remounted Lights Out and rode him gently on; while the riding-master followed with Katherine and the other two, both very subdued.

'If you had said you could not ride, all this would not have happened,' said Alice crossly to Katherine.

'I did not know the horse would run away like that. I can sit all right when it goes quietly,' said Katherine, who pluckily insisted on continuing the ride.

Winifred cantered after Alistair, who had a look of anger, which she was trying to subdue, in her eyes.

'Alistair, what frightened Katherine's horse like that?' she inquired with a puzzled air.

'Mine did,' said Alistair shortly.

'Then what frightened your horse?' persisted Winifred.

'Don't let us talk about it any more; let's jump this gate,' said Alistair, and flew over it as lightly as a bird and was off across a field, when the riding-master, whose brows were knit, called her back.

'You did that beautifully, miss, but I must keep you to the road to-day; I am afraid this young lady is not up to cross-country jumping yet,' he said.

'But we are. Let us go ahead and across James

Brown's fields; we have been before, and we'll meet you at the cross-roads,' pleaded Winifred.

'Not to-day, miss,' said the riding-master firmly. 'I'll not trust you out of my sight to-day, and I've very good reasons for not doing so.'

CHAPTER XIX.

KATHERINE'S CASTLES IN THE AIR.

'I SAY, look at the equestrians; they might have been to a funeral instead of having been for a ride this lovely, fresh afternoon!' exclaimed Brenda to Davidine, as the two were returning from their gardens across the lawn and saw the four riders coming down the drive.

'Who is the fourth girl? I see Alice, Winifred, and Alistair. Why, surely that is not Katherine Kerr? How awkwardly she sits!' cried Davidine.

The two stopped to watch them. 'She looks as if she were ill or had had a fall. Her hair is almost as untidy as her cousin's,' remarked Brenda.

They walked on to the side-entrance, and arrived just as the riding-party were dismounting.

'Have you enjoyed your ride?' called out Brenda.

Nobody answered; and Williams, the riding-master, who was generally so cheery and had a pleasant word for all the young ladies of Nun's Eaton, whom he took out in wagonettes for all their outings, looked as grave as a judge.

'I say, is anything the matter?' demanded Davidine.

'No, miss, I hope not,' said Williams, as he helped Katherine off her horse and said to her, 'Feel all right, miss? Except a little stiff, of course.'

'I 'm aching all over, and I have a dreadful pain in my side. I don't believe I can walk to the house,' said Katherine, who looked the picture of woe.

'Ah, that 's only natural, being your first ride,' said Williams more cheerfully.

'Take my arm, Katherine,' said Alice hastily, before Alistair, who was coming to her cousin, could get there.

'That 's better,' said Williams, watching her progress to the house. 'She 'll be all right to-morrow. And now I should like to have a few words with Miss Dolling,' he wound up with a grim look on his face.

Alistair had walked into the house after the other two, and Winifred was following her, when Davidine caught her arm. 'What is the matter, Winifred? Has Alistair been playing any of her mad pranks again?' she inquired.

Winifred, who was a great talker, was only too glad to get a listener for the tale of this uncomfortable ride, and said, 'Yes; Katherine's and Alistair's horses bolted, and Katherine was thrown. It 's lucky it was uphill, or it would have been much worse,' said Winifred.

'What an extraordinary thing for Williams to bring such horses! He generally brings old nags that a baby could ride, the girls complain; and to give a skittish horse to a girl that had never ridden before!' exclaimed Davidine.

'He didn't know that; we none of us did. I

can't understand it all; we have often ridden those horses before. I liked Lights Out—the one Alistair rode—because he had some go in him, but he is generally quite quiet; but Katherine's Mollie is too slow and gig-trotting for me. I can't imagine what made them go off like that while Williams was putting my saddle right.'

'No wonder Williams looked grave and wanted to see Miss Dolling. She won't trust us to him if his horses take to bolting,' said Brenda.

'It wasn't his fault, if those horses had been ridden safely before. It's those two new girls; they are always doing something outrageous. I dare say they irritated their horses or something,' opined Davidine.

'Well, Williams did say something to Alistair about having hit Lights Out on the neck when she was told not to touch him there,' put in Winifred eagerly.

'There! what did I say?' cried Davidine.

'Oh, but, Davidine, I am sure it was by mistake; and she saved the horse from rolling on to Katherine. Williams said so, and he said she was the best young lady-rider he had ever had at Nun's Eaton. You should have seen her go over a five-barred gate!' cried Winifred.

'A good rider does not whip her horse on the head,' said Davidine severely, as she put her cloak off and went in to tea.

Williams, meanwhile, was closeted with Miss

Dolling for considerably longer than five minutes; but when he came out he looked very much relieved. Evidently Miss Dolling, who was a just woman, had not blamed him for the accident, and had assured him that she trusted him in spite of it; and she was quite safe in doing so, for, as Williams said when he was telling his wife the story that evening, 'I take as much care of the young ladies as if they were my own.'

But if Williams was relieved, the same cannot be said of Miss Dolling, who was very much worried, and sent for Miss Caruthers to talk the matter over with her.

'The trouble seems to have been caused by using a whip to Lights Out,' said Miss Dolling, 'and Alistair denies having done this.'

'Then you may be sure she did not,' said Miss Caruthers quietly.

Miss Dolling looked pleased. 'I am glad you agree with me and with Williams; for he, strange to say, said decidedly that she was too good a horsewoman and too fond of animals to use a whip unnecessarily, especially after she had been warned not to do so; and that, though he didn't know her, he knew when any one was telling the truth, and she was when she said she had not used the whip,' said Miss Dolling.

The two ladies were silent; neither cared to say what was in her mind. At last Miss Caruthers said, 'What do you think about it, Miss Dolling?'

'I am afraid it was a mischievous trick on the part of Alice; let us hope it was thoughtlessness and not wickedness; but I am not satisfied with that girl. What is your opinion?' inquired Miss Dolling.

'I am of your opinion. I do not like to think of failing with any girl, but I do not seem to have made any impression on Alice,' said Miss Caruthers.

'It is impossible not to have some failures among so many girls, and if she does not alter before Christmas I shall be obliged to request that she does not return. I very nearly decided to do so at midsummer; but her parents are dead, and I sent her to you as a last hope,' said Miss Dolling.

'A forlorn hope, but I am very much flattered,' said Miss Caruthers, smiling as she rose to go.

'And now I want you to do me another favour. Will you interview and deal with Katherine yourself? She is a good girl, but she has been very much spoilt, and she is learning some severe lessons here. I think she learnt more than a riding-lesson to-day, and I would rather you punished her for going out without proper permission than that I did.'

Miss Caruthers agreed to this, and went back to Lorne House, meaning to send for Katherine; but she was met at the door by Miss Eagen, in whose eyes there was a merry twinkle in spite of her efforts to appear grave. 'I have sent Katherine Kerr to bed,' she announced.

Miss Caruthers looked at her in surprise, and waited for explanations, for this was not a Nun's Eaton punishment, especially for a girl of nearly sixteen; nor was it the housekeeper's business to punish girls.

'She was crying with pain, and said she thought she must have caught cold and got rheumatics—she evidently does not know what a first ride means—so I sent her to have a hot bath, and she is now in bed and feels better, but says she is never going to ride again,' declared Miss Eagen.

'She is a naughty girl,' said Miss Caruthers, but did not explain why to Miss Eagen.

When she went up to the dormitory, Katherine was lying back in bed, looking so white and weary that Miss Caruthers felt sorry for her; but she scolded the girl well for going out without asking her first. 'I cannot understand your doing so, nor why you did so. Miss Dolling would willingly have given you leave to learn to ride, and you would have practised in the riding-school instead of going on the road the first time. Nobody ever does such a thing.'

Katherine groaned. 'I wish I had not gone. Alice arranged it all before I had time to think,' said Katherine, who never liked to own herself in the wrong.

'It was extremely wrong of Alice, but it was your pride that was really at the bottom of it, Katherine. You did not choose to own that you

could not ride, and you might have been killed but for your cousin. You might take an example from her,' said Miss Caruthers.

Katherine flushed angrily. 'I do not want to be like Alistair, thank you,' she said proudly.

'You could not be if you tried; she is a very original character. But you might imitate her in two things, and these are in her simple straightforwardness and humility,' proceeded Miss Caruthers, and with that she left Katherine. She felt that the girl had been punished enough for that day, for she had bruised her arm badly in her fall.

Katherine lay and pondered over Miss Caruthers's words. Her pride was hurt at the suggestion that Alistair was her superior, and, worst of all, that she was original, which was what Katherine prided herself upon being as a poetess, and it took her by surprise to hear Miss Caruthers speak so highly of Alistair, as if she appreciated her more than her (Katherine). The girls didn't, thought Katherine to herself; and then she thought of the ride and of the way Alistair had come to her aid and pulled that dreadful horse away from her, and her heart softened towards Alistair. The thought came to her that she would like to be superior to Alistair, and win Miss Caruthers's approval. Most girls who went into Lorne House felt like that, somehow; and she was making up her mind to be a model pupil and be admired and beloved by mistresses and girls alike, and was building castles in the air,

in which she was the chief person, and was not proud, but condescended to every one.

She lay there with eyes shut, and started when she heard a voice say, 'May I come in?'

It was Alice, and Katherine, who was a little tired of her own thoughts, was glad to see the girl, and, true to her resolution of reform, said, 'I ought to have told you to-day that I could not ride.'

'You didn't know; you did awfully well, and it was plucky of you to go on for such a long ride. You must be dead-tired and stiff,' said Alice.

'I am,' said Katherine with emphasis.

'Never mind, you'll be all right to-morrow; that fall shook you. If your cousin had been able to manage her horse it would not have happened; but she thinks she can do everything, and she can't,' said Alice.

The fact was that Alice had been considered the best rider in the school till Alistair came, and she was bitterly jealous when she heard Williams declare Alistair to be the most beautiful rider at Nun's Eaton.

'Yes, she ought not to have let it run away,' said Katherine in her ignorance. 'But she does ride well.'

'You will ride much better; you have a better figure than she has,' said Alice.

This was not true, but Alice knew that Katherine swallowed any amount of flattery, and she gave

her plenty of it; and when she left a few minutes later Katherine had a higher opinion of herself than ever, and was as jealous of Alistair.

Her next visitor was Alistair, but Katherine was in no mood to talk to her cousin. Shutting her eyes as if she wanted to go to sleep, she said coldly, 'Yes, I'm better, thank you. I wish you would learn to manage horses before you go riding with other people; it's different riding on an English high-road from running wild on Scottish hills.'

Alistair's temper rose. 'You to talk like that when you don't know the head from the tail of a horse, and had no business to deceive us this afternoon into thinking you could ride!' cried Alistair. Then she stopped, and added humbly, 'I beg your pardon, Katherine; I ought not to have spoken to you like that. Please forgive me.'

Katherine was touched, but the remembrance of Miss Caruthers's advice to copy her cousin's humility made her harden her heart again, and she only said, 'Of course I forgive you. But, please, go away, Alistair; my head is aching and I want to go to sleep.'

So Alistair went away, despairing of ever getting her cousin to be friends with her.

Of course the tale of the ride as told by Alice did not add to Alistair's popularity, or, to put it more correctly, added to her unpopularity. For unpopular she certainly was, and, somehow, whatever she did was unusual, or, as the girls called it,

'odd,' and Alice, alas! did her best to keep up this reputation.

'Miss Caruthers, may I go to the top of the hill?' inquired Alistair, who went straight to the House-mistress from her cousin's cubicle.

Miss Caruthers looked at Alistair and saw signs of disturbance. It was not the time for walking in the garden, but for study; but the sympathetic mistress guessed that the hot Highland blood wanted a run to the top of the hill in the park to cool it, and said, 'Just for ten minutes, Alistair; but another time try to get your walk over in walk-time.'

Then Alice declared, 'That's the way. Look at Alistair Comyns running like a wild creature up that hill. I can't understand Miss Dolling having such a girl in her school; she's just like a savage, and Miss Caruthers pets her.'

Davidine and Brenda looked out at her, but made no remark, loyalty to Miss Caruthers preventing it; and opening their books, they were soon deep in study, and had forgotten about Alistair till she came in very softly, her eyes shining, and took her seat at her desk.

'Running hath charms to soothe the savage breast,' misquoted Brenda in an undertone.

'She does not look savage now; she looks—very nice,' commented Davidine, and then there was silence till the study-hour was over.

CHAPTER XX.

ALISTAIR BEGINS AN ODD FRIENDSHIP.

SOME days had passed since the first ride, and, thanks to the weather, a good many more walks and rides had followed it. More than one had been taken, with Alice and Winifred as heads and the cousins as tails; but, somehow, it generally happened that the heads and tails got mixed, and that Alice and Katherine walked on or rode together, while Winifred dropped behind with Alistair.

It was on one of these walks that Winifred attracted Alistair's attention from the country round her by sighing loudly several times.

At last Alistair, whom the fresh, damp air seemed to intoxicate, turned her glowing face to Winifred and said, 'What is the matter? Are you feeling ill? Doesn't this lovely soft wind make you feel well?'

'I am not ill; I am only sad,' replied Winifred, with a sentimental air.

'Oh, I am sorry. Have you bad news from home? Is any one ill or in trouble?' inquired Alistair sympathetically.

'I am in trouble myself,' said Winifred.

Now Alistair, as she had remarked to her cousin, 'misliked' both their companions, and felt very

deeply Katherine's desertion of her for Alice, which left her (Alistair) to walk with Winifred; but since the day when Katherine had told her impulsive untruth, which had so shocked Alistair, the elder cousin had shunned the younger one, and not all Alistair's efforts at friendliness could overcome this avoidance.

Katherine felt herself Alistair's superior and elder, and she could not bear to have her weakness shown; besides which, that lapse from truthfulness troubled Katherine far more than it did Alistair, who forgot all about it, or would have forgotten but for Katherine.

So the two drifted apart instead of drawing nearer, as Miss Dolling had hoped they would for their mutual benefit, and each made a friend of the last girl that the Head-mistress would have chosen for them, and with results which even she did not foresee.

This afternoon, accordingly, Alistair as usual was left to walk alone, till Winifred, finding that two was company and three none, fell behind with her, and proceeded to make a confidante of her, not altogether to Alistair's joy. However, there was no way of getting out of it without being unkind, and Alistair's sense of duty came to her aid, and she said kindly, 'I am sorry. Can I help you at all?'

'I don't know. I only know that I am very miserable,' replied Winifred, putting on a melancholy air.

'Don't be miserable, Winifred; think how lovely the woods are with all these lovely colours. I simply love them!' said Alistair enthusiastically.

Winifred caught at the last words as giving her the opening she needed. 'That's just it; when you love something or somebody you don't care about anything else!' she cried.

'But why should loving anybody make you miserable? I should think it would make you happy,' objected Alistair.

Winifred shook her head. Then she said, 'Can I trust you? I badly want some one's help, for I don't know what to do.'

Alistair hesitated; then she replied, not too cordially, it must be owned, 'I shall be very glad to help you if I can; and as for trusting me, we Comynses do not betray people's confidences;' and she threw back her head proudly.

'Oh, thank you!' cried Winifred eagerly, very little encouragement being needed by her to give this same confidence; and she pulled a rather crumpled and dirty-looking letter out of her pocket. 'Read that,' she said, thrusting it into Alistair's hand.

Alistair took it somewhat unwillingly, and opening the sheet, read the first few words. Then she grew rather grave, and said, looking very uncomfortable, 'Isn't it rather private? Do you think he would like me to read it? For the letter began, 'My loved one,' and though Alistair was

only thirteen, she had been made the confidante of the peasants in their simple love affairs, and had written more than one affectionate letter for a Highland lassie to her lad far away, and read his letter in return. But this was different somehow, and instinctively Alistair shrank from reading what was evidently a love-letter, and to a schoolgirl of fifteen.

But Winifred waved aside her scruple. 'Oh, Bill won't mind. He said I must try to get a pal to help me, as I could never do it alone,' she explained.

'Do what?' inquired Winifred. 'And who's "Bill"?'

'You read on and you'll see. Bill's my young man. He wants me to marry him. He's desperately in love with me,' said Winifred with satisfaction.

Alistair's grandmother, she remembered, had married at fifteen, so such a thing was possible; and love and marriage were very romantic and beautiful, she knew; but, try as she might, she could not find anything romantic in the sickly-faced, sentimental Winifred, and Alistair asked naturally enough why she had come to school if she was engaged to be married, for Winifred had come to Nun's Eaton 'late in her teens,' as the girls put it, towards the end of the summer term, a most unusual time for a girl to enter, and so had only been at Nun's Eaton a month longer than Alistair and Katherine, and had hitherto not made any friends.

If Alistair had but known it, this was the third attempt she had made at finding a confidante, for Miss Dolling's girls did not care for that kind of romance and conversation about young men, and it was discouraged in new girls, who soon took the healthy, happy, outdoor tone of the school, and forgot such nonsense, if they had ever indulged in it.

However, Alistair, though she disliked silly nonsense as much as any Nun's Eaton girl, could not well avoid it this day; nor could she refuse to read the letter thrust into her hands after Winifred, with tears in her eyes, said, 'They have sent me here to separate me from him and forget him, and I can't. And see how sad he is!'

So Alistair read how 'Bill' was pining away for love of Winifred, and she was not a little puzzled by the well-expressed and high-flown language in which this badly written letter was couched; and when she turned the page she was still more astonished, for the spelling and grammar suddenly became very bad as 'Bill' ceased to express his love, but begged Winifred to 'cut school' and run away with him.

'He wants you to elope with him?' gasped Alistair.

'Yes; but you won't split, will you?' said Winifred.

'But—but it's very dishonourable of him! You are only fifteen. And your people! What would

they say? And is he—is he a gentleman?' cried Alistair, who was quite bewildered and taken aback by all this sudden information.

'There, you are as bad as the rest, and I expected you to be different, being Scotch!' cried Winifred.

'What has my being Scotch got to do with my being different from other people?' inquired Alistair.

'Oh, now, I didn't mean to say that. Of course I know Alice and some of the girls say you are odd and all that; but now I know you better I don't believe a word of it, and I'm not afraid of you, though you do say funny things; but what I meant was your Robbie Burns, who says, "The rank is but the guinea's stamp, the man's the gowd for a' that." Bill often quotes that.'

'Yes, I know; but a dishonourable man is not gold, but dross,' said Alistair, the stern teaching of her aunt and Jeanie having taught her to be uncompromising.

'But what can he do? They won't let him see me, or marry me, or anything, and these letters only come under cover from our housemaid, and I have to send mine back to her; and I'm sure she reads them, horrid girl!' said Winifred viciously.

'Do you carry on a clandestine correspondence, then?' said Alistair, looking very much disgusted, and handing back the letter.

'Oh, don't be unkind; I am so unhappy! I don't want to run away from school all alone. I am afraid; but Bill loves me so!' wailed Winifred.

'If this man really loved you, I shouldn't think he'd want to make you run away from school and deceive your people and Miss Dolling and every one; and, besides, it would be a horrid sort of wedding with no pretty dresses or cake or anything,' said Alistair with sudden inspiration, for Winifred was very fond of sweet things, and cake especially.

'That's just what I say; and though Bill is very nice and I like him, I don't want to go to a registry office in London to be married.'

'I should think not! Just tell him, if he is an honourable man, to go and call on your guardian, and ask him to let you be properly engaged, and promise to wait a year or so. You are not half-educated yet,' said Alistair.

'Bill would never dare to call on my guardian. You see, he's only a butcher's assistant, and he goes to the back-door,' said Winifred, who was so occupied with her own affairs that she did not see how they would strike an outsider.

Alistair was silent. All the pride of the Comynses was in arms. To think that she should be made the confidante of a low correspondence with a butcher's assistant! 'I would rather not hear any more about it, thank you. If you choose to do

a low, dishonourable thing like running away with a person like that, or any person, please don't let me know anything about it;' and Alistair, raging at the enforced companionship, walked on in silence, and no attempts of Winifred could break it.

That evening they all went to church, and Alistair felt as if the hymns and the prayers restored her tone and made her forget the horrid conversation of the afternoon; but, alas! the sermon was on pride.

Alistair, used to the long discourses of the north, folded her hands and prepared patiently to listen; but the preacher seemed to be preaching at her the whole time, and calling her a Pharisee for her treatment of Winifred. 'Remember what Wesley said when he saw a murderer led by: "There, but for the grace of God, goes John Wesley." So never turn your back on a sinner, or think yourself better than he; but hold out a helping hand and try to make him better, and if you can do nothing else, pray for him. You cannot hate or despise the man you pray for.'

The girls, who thought Alistair 'religious' overmuch at times, noticed how long she knelt in prayer after the sermon, keeping them in the pew, and how grave she looked when she rose from her knees.

Katherine, with whom she walked home, and

to whom she was very friendly, chose to think that Alistair was holding out a helping hand to her as a sinner, and was very cold and distant, and finally caught up Alice and Winifred, with the result that the latter was left alone, not daring to join Alistair.

But Alistair went to her side. 'I'm afraid I was fine and rude this afternoon, Winifred; but if you'll forget it, I'll be glad to be friends again,' she said simply.

'Oh! thank you. I should like to have you for a friend.' (Alistair winced.) 'And I've been thinking, too, I never can run away. It is dishonourable, as you say, though you do put it rather strongly. So, if you will only help me to write a letter and put him off, I will.'

'With pleasure,' said Alistair heartily. And together they concocted a letter, in which was enclosed a cheap ring which 'Bill' had sent Winifred, and which he was begged to keep for a year at least, during which time Winifred was going to try to forget him.

'And you know, Winifred, if you were to play lacrosse, you would find that you would soon manage that,' said Alistair confidently.

Miss Dolling watched the friendship with amused and sympathetic eyes. She knew all about 'Bill,' and guessed even what the thick letter contained that was addressed to a man and brought to her by Alistair, who looked at her with grave, candid

eyes as she asked that it might be registered and no questions asked.

And that was the end of 'Bill,' who wrote a maudlin and ill-spelt letter, and gave Winifred up. And that was the beginning of Alistair's friendship with Winifred.

CHAPTER XXI.

SCOTCH VERSUS ENGLISH.

THERE was one remark Winifred let fall during the Sunday walk which returned again and again to Alistair's mind long after she had forgotten 'Bill' and the rest of her companion's foolish conversation, and that was that the other girls thought her odd, and Winifred had added that *she* was not afraid of her. Alistair wondered uncomfortably whether this was the reason that girls who happened to speak very often just answered her and went away, except at games, where they seemed to forget this reserve.

Moreover, Katherine decidedly avoided her. Alistair tried to shake off these troublesome thoughts, and as she was too healthy-minded to brood she generally succeeded. But at last it became obvious to her that though groups of girls were civil enough to her, yet, with the exception of Davidine and Brenda, who were too busy to have much time to spare for conversation, no girl ever came to speak to her alone, and if she found herself by chance alone with any girl, that girl always sheered off.

'How dare they behave like that to me?' cried Alistair as she walked across the playground, her hand clenched and her lips moving as she made the above remark to the air—which was, however, not

the only recipient of the conversation, for a group of girls croqueting on the grass in a hollow heard voices or a voice, and raising their heads, saw Alistair, as they imagined, raving all by herself.

'Oh, it's only that lunatic Alistair Comyns,' said Alice, who, as ill-luck would have it, happened to be among them.

'But really she does look rather mad. What can Miss Dolling be thinking of to let her loose among us?' protested a lazy-looking girl as she dragged her coat round her; for though it was one of those summer-like days that sometimes come in November, still it was not summer.

'She can't be mad or Miss Dolling would never have her,' said a sensible Sixth Form girl.

'I don't suppose Miss Dolling knows how mad she is; those kind of people are very cunning,' announced Alice. Whether she really had persuaded herself that Alistair was peculiar or not is not certain, but as she was a very shrewd girl it is to be feared that she had no such doubts; and, at any rate, it is certain that she did not for a moment believe Alistair to be mad, and was venting her dislike on the Scotch girl, which had been increased by Winifred's friendship for her, in this malicious way.

Nun's Eaton stood far above most girls' schools in this, that petty gossip did not flourish; the girls led too wholesome an outdoor life to listen to it. But among five hundred girls it would be impossible

not to have some unsatisfactory ones, though even they generally took the tone of the school so far as to try to seem honourable and truthful, even if they were not naturally so.

Winifred, as has been seen, dropped her clandestine correspondence, not only because Alistair advised, but because 'Bill' and his letter did not sound so well in the atmosphere of Nun's Eaton as it did at her guardian's, with a foolish housemaid as sole confidante.

Alistair was all-unconscious of the criticisms of the little group in the hollow, being far too angry at the brusque way in which she had just been treated by a schoolfellow. The girl in question was sitting alone, but as soon as Alistair approached she began to walk away in the opposite direction. Alistair, thinking the girl did not know that she wanted to speak to her, hurried after her, calling her by name; but at this the other also hastened her steps till she broke into a run, turning her head over her shoulder to say, 'I can't stop; I am in a hurry. I want to catch those girls crossing the lawn.'

Then it was, with rage burning in her heart, that Alistair had turned back to go—she did not quite know where.

Her first impulse was to go and complain to Miss Dolling, who was a half-relation; but these few weeks of school had taught Alistair enough of schoolgirl etiquette to know that such a proceeding was not approved of by either mistresses or girls.

Moreover, Miss Dolling was that afternoon at one of the public meetings she often attended on matters of educational interest.

Alistair's clannish Scotch instinct next led her to tell Katherine about it, and ask her if she thought her odd, or if she could tell what was the meaning of this behaviour on the part of the other girls.

Katherine was in the study. If she could possibly find an excuse for stopping in she did, and Miss Caruthers, with her usual tact, did not force her to go out for more than a certain time daily at first.

'Katherine, if I ask you a question, will you promise me to tell me the truth?' began Alistair, standing straight before her cousin.

It was a most unfortunate remark to make. Katherine Kerr looked up from the book she was reading with an angry look in her eyes that Alistair did not at all understand, and said coldly, 'I really don't know what you mean by talking to me like that. You really are too odd, Alistair!'

'How dare you?' said Alistair, coming up quite close to Katherine, and speaking with suppressed passion. 'How dare you say that? And you my own mother's niece! Oh, shame on you, Katherine —shame!'

'Please to go away; I do not find your ravings interesting,' said Katherine, looking down again at her book, which she had found very interesting.

What might have happened next cannot be known, for Miss Caruthers, who generally appeared

when her presence was needed, came into the study, and said, 'Alistair and Katherine, how is it you are both in the house this beautiful afternoon? Reading is not allowed in play-hours.'

'I came in to ask Katherine a question,' replied Alistair, and turned to go out into the grounds.

But Miss Caruthers had caught a sight of the girl's face and saw that something was wrong, and she said, 'Come and umpire with me at the Preparatory School hockey, Alistair. You need only put on your hat.—And you, Katherine, put down your book and go out into the playing-fields.'

In a moment Alistair returned with her hat. There were signs of tears on her face, but she said nothing, and looked more cheerful as the two walked up the steep hill to the Preparatory School where the hockey-match was to take place.

'You go too fast for my town limbs,' smiled Miss Caruthers, as Alistair's young feet seemed to have some difficulty in keeping slow pace with her.

'I am sorry. I almost forget I am in England when I get upon a hill like this,' said Alistair, taking a long breath.

'I suppose the life here is very different,' observed Miss Caruthers. It was rather a commonplace remark, and so Katherine would have criticised it; but Miss Caruthers wanted to get Alistair to talk about her Highland life, and this was the first remark that occurred to her.

'Indeed, it is different. I had no idea people

could be so different and yet be the same flesh and blood. It 's awful!' said Alistair impulsively.

'Why awful, Alistair? We may be different, but we are not awful, I hope,' protested the House-mistress.

'No, not all—not you, Miss Caruthers. I was just thinking to myself that you might almost be Scotch yourself, you are so calm and composed and decently-behaved,' cried Alistair, and then stopped, for a queer look had come into Miss Caruthers's face, and it struck Alistair that she had said something odd. 'I can't help it,' she added.

'What can't you help? Thinking I am Scotch? There is no need for you to help it. I am Scotch,' replied Miss Caruthers with a smile.

'I might have known it!' ejaculated Alistair.

'And now, please, tell me how the English are awful. I have lived among them for a good many years, and I have not found them so; in fact, I do not see very much difference between the two countries or their people, to tell you the truth,' said Miss Caruthers.

But Alistair's mood was changed. She had started on her walk with her heart so full that she would have made a confidante of the House-mistress, despite her knowledge of school etiquette; but now, strange to say, she had no further desire to do so. She was no longer miserable; she had found a country-woman, and she did not feel so lonely. So, with true Scottish caution, she replied, 'Well, perhaps after all

they are not so bad; and as for being different, it may be that it 's I that am different;' and she looked questioningly at her House-mistress.

Miss Caruthers made another attempt to draw Alistair out. 'What makes you think you are different from the other girls, or the other girls different from you?' she asked.

'They seem to think me so,' blurted out the girl.

Miss Caruthers deliberated with herself how to answer this statement, which she knew to be quite true. 'And you seem to think them different; and so you are a little, because you have been brought up alone, and your individuality has come out, instead of being crushed as it would have been if you had been brought up in a crowd, where one tends to become like one's neighbour,' she said.

'I see. But is it a good thing or a bad thing to have individuality?' inquired Alistair.

'A good thing, provided it is a good individuality, and does not make one too peculiar.'

'Ah!'

There was such meaning in the 'Ah!' that Miss Caruthers inquired kindly, 'Well, Alistair?'

'Miss Caruthers, please tell me, am I peculiar?' she asked anxiously.

'Not the least. You are unconventional, but that 's all,' the mistress replied promptly.

'You don't think me odd or—or—mad?' asked Alistair.

'My dear child, pray don't get such ideas into your head. Why should you think of such things? I thought you were too healthy-minded to be morbid,' expostulated Miss Caruthers.

'I am not morbid, and I will never think of such things again, now that you tell me I do not do odd things,' declared Alistair; and she looked so radiant when they turned in at the gate of Hill-top Preparatory School that the principal, looking at her, thought what happy, healthy girls Nun's Eaton produced.

Alistair gave her decisions with a very confident air, but as she was known to be an excellent player this was excused; and she went back to Lorne House for tea and study, having forgotten about Katherine and her insulting remarks.

Katherine, on the contrary, had not forgotten them at all, and was feeling very uncomfortable and angry with herself for being unkind to her cousin, and angry with Alistair for having brought it upon herself by her remark. For Katherine, it must be remembered, imagined that it was an allusion to her unfortunate untruth told on the spur of the moment, over which she herself brooded, and therefore imagined that Alistair must always have in mind, whereas Alistair never thought of it when she asked the question.

It annoyed her, too, that Miss Caruthers should have asked Alistair to go out with her, and not her (Katherine), who was older; and she felt as if the

House-mistress's tone had been more friendly to Alistair than to herself, so her heart hardened against her cousin.

She would have been angrier still if she had known that Miss Caruthers had accidentally overheard her conversation with her cousin as she was passing out to go to Hilltop School, and had turned back to take Alistair away from her cousin's unkindness.

'I have had such a lovely time at Hilltop, Katherine, and Miss Caruthers is so nice. And, fancy, she's Scotch! I might have known it,' cried Alistair, coming in to tea, her hair wildly flying as she walked. despite the orthodox plait in which it was braided,

'Thank goodness, I'm only half Scotch! I'm glad I have some sane English blood in me; and I wish you had, Alistair, and then perhaps your hair would not be so wild,' said Katherine.

She wished the words unsaid as soon as they were out of her mouth; and, in fact, she began to wonder what possessed her that she could say nothing but nasty things to her cousin.

But Alistair only laughed as she shook back her shaggy mane. 'Jeanie is always scolding me about my hair; she says it's not like a decent Christian. But I tell her the Almighty created my unruly red hair, just as much as He did her smooth, gray ones. So they must please Him, and nothing else matters;' and she put down her cup and went off to study.

CHAPTER XXII.

ALISTAIR'S ODD WAYS.

ALISTAIR went off humming to herself, and the girls stared after her as she swung along, tossing her red locks back from her forehead.

Then they turned and looked inquiringly at Katherine; but Katherine, whom any allusion to religion in public always made very uncomfortable, had her eyes fixed on an invisible tea-leaf in her cup.

'Do you think she's all there?' inquired Alice in low and sympathetic tones of her as they walked to the big house where they had a class.

Katherine gave an impatient movement, and answered testily, 'How should I know? I think she's silly'——

'Alice!' shouted a voice behind her; and Alice, with a hasty, 'Excuse me, Katherine,' went off with only the first part of Katherine's remark in her ears. It went out of Katherine's mind that she had not finished her sentence to the effect that Alistair was 'silly to talk about religion like that,' and it never occurred to her that a very different construction might be put upon her half-finished sentence.

'Alistair darling,' said a voice in her ear; and Alistair, frowning, saw Winifred close to her.

'I wish you would not be silly,' she said.

'How am I silly?' inquired Winifred humbly.

'Calling me silly names. But what were you going to say?' Alistair inquired more kindly.

'If you won't be angry,' began Winifred; and then, as Alistair made a sign to encourage her, she continued, 'You wish I would not call you darling, and I wish you wouldn't talk as you do about religion.'

'Why not?' demanded Alistair.

'Because'—— said Winifred, and could get no further, for she could not think of a good reason why Alistair should not speak of religion. At last she said, 'No one does, you know.'

Alistair considered. '*Do* I talk much about religion? If so, it must be in my sleep, for I don't think I have ever done so intentionally,' she declared.

Winifred gasped. 'Why, you've just done it!' she exclaimed.

Alistair turned her great eyes upon Winifred. 'Why don't you say what you mean? That's not talking religion. I just said the Almighty made my hair. Why do you object to that?' she asked.

'I don't; it's the others,' explained Winifred.

But Alistair, fresh from her talk with Miss Caruthers, did not hear this, and said, 'Please, Winifred, I do not want to hear about the others. Tell me, have you worked out that problem?' alluding to a sum in algebra.

Winifred did not dare to say any more, but she was so devoted to Alistair that she wished some one could do something to prevent her saying what she considered odd things. Poor Winifred was not very bright, but she was not a bad girl at all, and Alistair was having a very good influence upon her. She thought the matter over, and decided in her own mind to do something, she did not know what; so it was with rather an absent air that she replied to Alistair, 'No, I couldn't do the problem; I can't get on with Miss Williams.'

'I think she is so easy to get on with,' protested Alistair.

'Yes; but you have a mathematical brain, and I have not, and it seems to go round when she begins demonstrating on the board with her chalk, scribbling down signs and numbers like wildfire,' said Winifred plaintively.

'I don't know that I have a mathematical brain, as you call it; but if you like to try to work with me—I don't know much mathematics, it's true, but I like them—I will ask Miss Caruthers if we may do our prep. together,' said Alistair.

'Oh, you darl—— I mean, you are kind! If you knew how dreadful it is to sit there and not understand. You seem to understand whether you have learnt the subject before or not. I suppose you are a clever family. Look at Katherine,' said Winifred.

Alistair laughed. 'I am not clever, and I am awfully ignorant; but I don't find the lessons we have difficult, so I'll be very glad to help you if I can.' And then they went in to the lesson.

True to her word, Alistair asked Miss Caruthers, who gladly gave the desired permission, and from that day the two worked together. Winifred's mistresses, with relief, found that she began to understand, and look less dull and worried at her lessons.

But now a new subject of conversation arose. That evening a new notice was seen pinned to the notice-board in Lorne House study.

'What is it they are all crowding round?' inquired Alistair of Winifred, whose desk had been put beside hers by Miss Caruthers's orders.

'It's an invitation from Wales House to a ball,' said Winifred after she had been to see.

'To whom?' inquired Alistair. 'To you?' for Winifred looked in a state of great excitement.

'To us all. We've got to come dressed as advertisements,' she explained.

'How stupid! I shall not go,' said Alistair, taking out her books to do some preparation.

'Oh, but you must! You can make such pretty dresses out of advertisements. I'm going to be a rhubarb-girl, like the picture, you know, of the girl dressed in sticks of rhubarb,' said Winifred.

'Oh, I see! What shall I be?' said Alistair, beginning to enter into the fun of the thing.

The other girls were eagerly discussing their dresses together in groups, in one of which Katherine was included, but of Alistair no one took any notice.

'You must go as a Highland lassie,' suggested Winifred suddenly.

'Then I should go as I am; a girl in the Highlands does not dress in costume. Well, that will save a lot of trouble,' she declared.

'Oh, but that won't do. You must be a copy of some advertisement. I have it! You can be the Scotch girl in that tea advertisement. I say, girls! Alistair is going to be the Scotch girl in the advertisement of three girls drinking tea, England, Scotland, and Ireland. Who will be England and Ireland?'

'I will be England,' said Davidine after a slight pause.

'You can't. You said you would be Britannia,' protested a chorus of voices; 'you would look so well.'

'Well, then, some one must offer to be England in my place,' said Davidine, and wished she had not. She had stepped into the breach to cover the sudden silence Winifred's request had caused, and hoped by this remark to make some girl come forward, but apparently in vain.

'I never said I was going to dress like that advertisement. I should not think of being such a caricature of a Scotch girl; they never dress like

that. I might be a fishergirl if you liked,' she added.

'What a good idea for Caller Herrin'! That will do finely,' cried Brenda, much relieved that Alistair did not seem offended, or even notice the unfriendly attitude of the Lorne House girls.

'Davidine,' she said that night to the head-girl of Lorne as the two monitors went their rounds to see that all was in order, 'something must be done.'

'About what?' demanded the other.

'About Alistair, and the feeling against her in the House, and in the whole school, as far as that goes,' replied Brenda.

'Oh, that's rather an exaggerated way of putting it, isn't it? Half the school don't know her except by name; in fact, it is only a dozen or two silly girls who are unfriendly, and they, I am sorry to say, are chiefly our own Lorne girls.'

'With Alice at the bottom of all the mischief. You know it is a disgrace to our House, and if Miss Dolling comes to hear of it she will feel it so; and it's hard lines on Miss Caruthers,' declared Brenda.

'What would you do? I have told the girls not to talk nonsense when they have said anything to me about Alistair, because I thought it best to treat it lightly. Of course, she is as sane as you or I, but'—— Here Davidine paused for

so long that Brenda saw she did not mean to continue.

'But what? I knew there was a but, Davidine. You are quite nice and kind to Alistair, but any one who knows you can see that it is an effort, and done from a sense of duty.'

Davidine laughed. 'I hope every one does not watch me as closely as you do; but since you have noticed it, I may as well tell you the truth, and that is, that I do not understand Alistair,' she said.

Brenda laughed too. 'Nor do I. You mean because she will drag in religion in such an odd way; and yet she is not a bit religious. But why should you mind? It's the way she has been brought up, I suppose, by that pious nurse of hers.'

'It makes me feel dreadfully uncomfortable, and so I avoid her,' said Davidine.

'Do you know, I rather like it. I hope I sha'n't make you feel uncomfortable, but it seems to me that God is so near to Alistair.' Brenda said this a little awkwardly, for at Nun's Eaton girls did not talk religion, though they acted it; and Davidine gave Brenda no encouragement, but the latter went on courageously: 'I was walking across the fields the other day with Alistair, when she picked up an insect or little creature of some kind that had been hurt, and held it in her hands so tenderly; and when, shuddering, because I hate

creepy, crawly things, I said to her, "Oh, throw the horrid thing away!" she said simply, "God made it," and took it to a bush, where she said it would be safe from being trodden on, and get all right again, she thought.'

'That is very beautiful,' said Davidine, and would have said more but that they came to the dormitory, and each went her way. Davidine went to each cubicle just to look and see that all were safely in bed and say a friendly good-night to the occupant, till she came to Alistair's cubicle, where she pulled aside the curtain, meaning to go in and say a few friendly words before she turned out the electric lights.

But it was with difficulty that she suppressed an exclamation; for the bed was empty, and no Alistair was to be seen in the cubicle.

Remembering her last experience of the girl's disappearance, she crossed to the window, meaning to look out and see if there were marks on the ground below, which, as it was a bright moonlight night, she hoped to be able to discover.

But, to her surprise and relief, the window was shut. She went to her own cubicle and waited a few minutes, hoping that Alistair would appear; but in vain. Then it struck Davidine that the one room she and Brenda had not been into was the study. Perhaps Alistair had gone to sleep and dreamt of her lessons, and was doing them in her sleep. At her desk she had been poring over some-

thing she was trying to explain to that dense Winifred, Davidine thought to herself; so, slipping on her dressing-gown, she went down to the study, turned on the electric lights, and looked all round; but the study was empty.

There was only one thing to be done, and that was to go and tell Miss Caruthers; and Davidine accordingly tapped at the drawing-room door, where the House-mistress was sitting peacefully reading.

'I can't find Alistair anywhere, Miss Caruthers,' she said.

The book dropped on the mistress's lap and she looked at Davidine inquiringly. 'When did you first miss her?' she asked very quietly, for Miss Caruthers took everything very calmly.

'About a quarter of an hour ago, when I went to say good-night to her,' Davidine replied.

'Did she go to her cubicle with the others after prayers?' demanded the mistress.

'Yes—no—I can't say,' stammered Davidine. 'I never noticed. But now that I come to think of it, Winifred was alone.'

'And what has that to do with it? Ah, I see; they go up in twos and threes, and Alistair is always with Winifred; perhaps she went up with her cousin to-night?' suggested Miss Caruthers.

'Oh no, they don't see much of each other. I don't think Katherine cares for her.'

'Do you, Davidine?' inquired Miss Caruthers.

Davidine hesitated. She was a little surprised,

well as she knew Miss Caruthers's placid disposition, at her cool way of taking the news of the disappearance of one of her pupils. However, she replied, 'Yes, I like her well enough. But I don't like her ways,' she added with feeling, this last 'way of disappearing' being one that she disliked.

'She is not used to school ways. I think it is wonderful that she has settled down as she has, and she is a very good girl; so go to bed. I will find her and bring her to the dormitory before long, and will see that she does not behave in this unorthodox way again. Good-night, Davidine,' said Miss Caruthers with a slight smile.

'Thank you, Miss Caruthers. Good-night,' replied Davidine, and went up to her dormitory wondering very much at the House-mistress's indifference. But, like all her girls, she had full confidence in her, and 'supposed she knew what she was about,' and apparently what Alistair was about.

But in the last supposition she was not quite right, for Miss Caruthers had no idea where her missing pupil was; she only felt sure that Alistair was not doing wrong intentionally. So the House-mistress of Lorne sat patiently in her drawing-room with the door ajar, waiting till Alistair should appear. No one looking at her would have noticed any sign of anxiety, except that she did not turn over the leaves of the book she had been reading.

In another hour she heard a sound, and, with a slight sigh of relief, she rose and left the room.

'Alistair, come here,' she said as a dark cloaked and hooded figure came past the door. But even Miss Caruthers, for the first time on record, gave a cry of dismay, for the white evening-frock Alistair wore under her cloak was covered with blood.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A STARTLING APPEARANCE.

THE girls, it should be explained, were allowed to wear their gymnastic-dresses, consisting of a dark-blue sailor blouse and short skirt, with tie and sash of the House colours, for games and school; but in the evening they were obliged to change into some kind of semi-evening frock, with a pretty light blouse, or in most cases a white dress. Alistair, being in mourning, wore a white muslin with black sash and ribbons, and this was dyed in red blood, as were her hands.

No wonder Miss Caruthers was startled out of her customary calm. 'Alistair,' she cried again, 'what have you been doing?'

Alistair turned a glowing and bright face to Miss Caruthers. 'Oh, Miss Caruthers! I am so sorry I startled you. It's the blood, of course. I ought to have kept my cloak shut, and then you would not have seen it,' she said, holding out her red-stained muslin.

'Whose blood is it? Have you hurt yourself?' inquired the House-mistress anxiously.

Before Alistair could reply there was a wild scream which made them both start. It was the lady-housekeeper, who happened to come in at the moment to say good-night to Miss Caruthers, and

came upon the two just as Alistair was holding out her dreadful-looking skirt, no doubt to examine it for the first time in the bright electric light.

Miss Eagen, it will be remembered, was quite a contrast to her friend Miss Caruthers, being very merry in character and rather excitable; and indeed she might be excused for her screaming at the sight Alistair presented.

The drawing-room door was quite near the green dormitory, and her scream was unfortunately heard there. Davidine, who was lying awake, listening with anxious ear for the return of her missing charge, heard it, and jumping out of bed, thrust her arms into her dressing-gown as she ran to the drawing-room, where she arrived to hear Alistair say in her soft Scotch accents, 'Don't be frightened; I am not hurt. I have only killed a'—— But she got no further, for at the sight of her and these words Davidine for the first time in her life fainted, and fell with a thud on the floor.

Miss Caruthers and Alistair, who were nearest to her, ran to her, while the practical housekeeper ran for restoratives.

In a moment Davidine opened her eyes, to say languidly, 'I am so sorry to have frightened you.' Then she saw Alistair, who was bending over Davidine with a most concerned face, and cried wildly as she pushed her away, 'Oh, send her away—send her away!'

'Hush, Davidine! Do not be unkind.—Alistair, go away for a minute; Davidine is nervous. You see, she is responsible for the other girls, and if you do not keep the rules she gets anxious about you,' said Miss Caruthers.

Alistair, looking very thoughtful, retired to the other end of the room; and when Davidine, very much ashamed of herself for being so babyish, was sitting quietly by the fire wrapped in a warm shawl, Miss Caruthers took a seat at the other side of the fireplace, and beckoned Alistair to come near.

'Now, Alistair, will you please explain to your monitor, whom you have frightened so badly, and to me what you have been doing?' she said severely, and she did not ask Alistair to sit down.

Davidine kept her eyes turned away from Alistair. She was not nervous as a rule, but she really did fear that this odd girl had done something dreadful — she did not quite know what.

'I am very sorry, Miss Caruthers. I see now that it was not right to do it without leave. It is so difficult for me to remember that I am not at home, and may not do what I like, that I am beginning to think I am a great trouble to you here, and that you had better send me back to Craigie. I have made Davidine ill now,' said Alistair humbly.

'You have not answered my question, Alistair.

How did you get into this dreadful state, and what did you mean by saying you had killed—something?' demanded Miss Caruthers.

Davidine shuddered; and Alistair looked at her in pity, crying, 'It was only this poor thing I killed,' and held up a dead rabbit.

For the second time that evening Miss Caruthers gave a violent start; and Davidine, turning round, stared in amazement at Alistair and then at Miss Caruthers, as much as to ask if this was to be allowed.

There was a stifled, choking sound from the sofa, on which was seated the lady-housekeeper, an interested and, it must be owned, an amused spectator of this scene.

Miss Caruthers took no notice of what she guessed was a suppressed laugh; but though she was very far from sharing her colleague's merriment, it helped to relieve her feelings. All the same she said severely, 'What can you be thinking of, Alistair? Do you mean to tell me you have been out poaching at this time of night?' It was then nearly ten o'clock, but it was late for Lorne House.

'I poaching? How dare you?' began Alistair, raising her head proudly; but horrified cries of 'Alistair, Alistair, remember to whom you are speaking,' from Miss Eagen and Davidine recalled her to her senses. The tears rose into her eyes as she said, 'I beg your pardon, Miss Caruthers; it's my wicked pride that Jeanie's always telling me

of. No, I do not poach on other people's land.' (Unconsciously Alistair spoke proudly.) 'I was standing at the open door for a moment before going up to bed, just to get a breath of fresh air and look at the lovely moon over the hill yonder, when I heard the cry of an animal in pain, and I just forgot everything and ran to it, and I found the poor thing in a trap.'

'In our grounds? Impossible! Miss Dolling would never allow such a thing,' cried Miss Caruthers.

'It was not in our grounds; it was in yon wood,' explained Alistair.

'You are forbidden to go into that wood,' said Miss Caruthers.

'To be sure, I never thought of that. I only thought of this poor thing that was tearing itself against a wire in its efforts to get out, so I had to kill it; and I came back as quickly as I could when I remembered that it was bedtime,' explained Alistair.

'You must report yourself to Miss Dolling to-morrow morning for disobedience. And now, please, go to bed, and remain in your dormitory till Davidine gives you leave to go out to-morrow morning,' said Miss Caruthers.

'Thank you. Of course I will tell Miss Dolling. And, indeed, Davidine, I will try not to frighten you again. I am always forgetting that English people are timorous and nervous,' said Alistair

earnestly and not in the least meaning to be insulting.

The two ladies looked at each other when the girls had left the room, and Miss Caruthers could not help smiling at Alistair's last remark.

'Well, I don't know whether we are, as Alistair says, a timorous and nervous race, but I am inclined to think she will make us so with her doings. What do you suppose Miss Dolling will say? If it were my school I should pack her off to her Highland home, where she can roam at will by night and day. I call it a very bad return for your kindness in taking her to Hilltop to-day,' declared the housekeeper.

'Then you would do a very foolish thing. There are half-a-dozen girls I should prefer to send away rather than keep in this school, but Alistair is not one of them,' declared Miss Caruthers.

'Oh, well, if Alistair Comyns is your ideal of a pupil, there is no more to be said, except that she is not mine, and that I should like to know what damages I shall get when she has shattered my nerves and I have to go in for a rest cure,' replied the other.

Miss Caruthers smiled and answered quietly, 'Don't be absurd. Of course she is troublesome with her uncivilised ways; but if you knew the relief it is to have to deal with a girl who is absolutely truthful and has a sense of duty, you would understand my affection for Alistair.'

Miss Eagen held up her hands in protest. 'If this evening's doings are a specimen of her sense of duty, I hope no more of our girls will develop it. Kindness to animals is very well and quite right, of course; but there are ways and ways, and Alistair Comyns's ways do not commend themselves to me.'

'She will tone down in time; one must have patience,' said Miss Caruthers.

'I am sorry for Davidine; but, to console you, I will own that I have a sneaking affection for Alistair myself. There is something very fascinating about her simplicity. But I hope Miss Dolling will give her a good scolding.'

'Davidine, I am in bed, and I will not get out of it without your leave, or disobey rules again, if I can help it,' said Alistair's voice very softly.

Davidine jumped out of bed, and, crossing to Alistair's cubicle, kissed her—a very rare demonstration at Nun's Eaton. 'I am sure you won't,' she said kindly; and Alistair won another friend.

Next morning Alistair went off very gravely, but not in the least frightened, to Miss Dolling, who had always a kind word and a smile for her when she met the girl. But this morning she had no smile on her face when Alistair entered. Miss Caruthers had told the tale to Miss Dolling, who was very angry at the fright and anxiety Alistair had caused.

'Reported again, Alistair! That is twice in your first term. Do you know what a third time means?' she inquired.

'No,' said Alistair, rather surprised, if the truth be known, at the severe tone.

'It means expulsion; and expulsion from Nun's Eaton is a great disgrace, and would prevent your being taken at any other school worth going to. Think what your father and mother would say if such a dreadful thing happened.'

Alistair had grown very white during this speech, and she was evidently having a struggle with her pride. 'Perhaps I had better leave now,' she said, and her lip trembled.

'No; I will keep you till the end of this term. Now tell me why you are sent to me again,' said Miss Dolling.

Alistair told the tale, and told also the effect her appearance had upon Davidine. She did not know that Miss Dolling had already heard this, nor that she was touched by the girl's honesty in relating what made her escapade worse; winding up, 'So you see I am a great trouble to Miss Caruthers and Davidine.'

'You are indeed; but there is no reason why you should be. All you have to remember is that it is your duty to obey rules and to ask leave before you do anything again. I must speak to your House-mistress and your monitor, and see if they are willing to undertake you, provided you

promise to behave better in future,' said Miss Dolling, dismissing Alistair after a little more serious conversation.

Alistair went away very much subdued, and with a little more idea of how to behave at school. But she had not heard the end of this exploit yet, as will be seen; and this was again the result of her simple nature.

When she was dressing for dinner that evening she went down to get out another dress, and carefully carried the blood-stained one rolled up under her arm. Seeing the maid in the packing-room, she gave it to her, saying, 'Will you please take this away and have it washed? I killed a rabbit last night, and you see the state of my dress, and I do not want it to frighten any of the girls.'

The maid, quite unsuspectingly, opened out the dress, and gave a cry at the state of it, which brought Alice and Winifred, who happened to be in the packing-room, to look.

Alistair turned round. 'Don't be frightened; it's only a rabbit's blood,' she explained.

'Oh Alistair, I do wish Alice had not seen it!' exclaimed Winifred, to whom Alistair related the story.

'Why should she not? She wasn't frightened, was she?' she inquired.

'No; but she will go repeating it, and—— But it's no use talking to you, Alistair. You are

much cleverer than I am, but you don't understand people a bit,' said Winifred in despair.

'I don't understand people here, but I understand all the people at home quite well,' said Alistair with truth, and troubled her head no more about the matter.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A LACROSSE MATCH.

'YOU think it a desirable friendship?' said Miss Caruthers to the Head-mistress as they walked briskly up and down the playing-fields, watching a game of lacrosse which was being played in one of the fields by girls who did not care for hockey, among whom was Katherine Kerr. The question was put apropos of this same girl, whose growing intimacy with Alice Miss Caruthers observed with distrust.

'I think it may do Alice good, and I do not believe it will do Katherine any harm—any permanent harm,' said Miss Dolling in her decided tones, as she stood and followed her niece's graceful movements with affectionate eyes.

Miss Caruthers, at has been said, was a silent woman, and she now made no reply. As a matter of fact she thought Katherine rather a weak and easily led character, but as she had unbounded faith in Miss Dolling's shrewd insight into character, she concluded the Head-mistress was right in her decision to let the girls be as much together as possible.

Presently Miss Dolling turned to Miss Caruthers after Katherine had made a graceful throw. 'That was pretty!' she exclaimed, and added, 'I know you think me mistaken, or at least'—as Miss Caruthers

made a gesture of dissent—'you think I am partial in my judgment of my niece, but I can assure you I am not. Much as I love Katherine, I know Alistair is the finer and stronger character; but Katherine has good principles and will never be led far wrong. Her stumbling-block is pride, and I am waiting for it to have a bad fall. It has had one or two tumbles already, which have done her good, and would have done more if Alice had not been there to flatter her. But I am biding my time to unmask that young lady, and show Katherine the kind of friend she has made, and—a few other things too.'

The hooting of a motor was now heard. Miss Dolling turned quickly. 'My sister and brother-in-law, and not on visiting-day! Just like James! Well, he sha'n't stop the lacrosse to see Katherine,' she exclaimed, as she turned off to meet them.

But she had not gone very far when she heard a babel of voices from the lacrosse-ground, and saw that Katherine had thrown down her bat and was running to meet her father and mother.

'Katherine, go back and finish your game at once! Do you imagine you are to interrupt a match and spoil the pleasure of twenty-three girls for your own?' she cried.

Katherine stood for a moment irresolute, but it was the Head-mistress of Nun's Eaton who spoke, and not Aunt Amy, and she did not dare to disobey. She turned and went back to the lacrosse-

ground, where the girls were standing in an excited group apologising to the visitors, a team from Hill-top Preparatory School, as it happened.

'She's a new girl this term, and doesn't know anything about games or school or anything. We'll play you one short,' the Nun's Eaton captain said to pacify the outraged visitors.

'No, no; we won't have that,' replied the Hill-top captain, who was a boy. 'They'll say that's why we won, if we do win; and it would be a disgrace to be beaten by a crippled team. I suppose she thinks as it's only the Preparatory it does not matter.'

'She doesn't know anything about it, and we do think it matters. We'll get another man,' cried the captain.

But now there was a shout of 'Here she is. She's thought better of it and is coming back;' and Katherine, looking half-ashamed and half-inclined to cry, came up to them.

'I am sorry to have interrupted the game. Please go on,' she said coldly.

The captain of her side felt very much inclined to give Katherine a piece of her mind, but on second thoughts decided that it might upset the girl again, and even 'send her off in a huff,' so she only remarked, 'It is not very polite to the visitors. Go to your place, please.'

Whether Katherine's pride was touched, or whether it was temper—probably a mixture of

both—she played far more energetically than before, and suddenly a ball was sent to her which she caught in her net and sent with tremendous force to the goalkeeper. But, alas! the latter was a little girl, who, though clever enough, did not expect this from Katherine and was not prepared. The ball hit her full on the cheek, and she dropped her racquet as she held her handkerchief to her face and stamped about in a paroxysm of pain. Her mouth bled a good deal, and the games mistress went up to her, and seemed to be doctoring her.

Katherine could not bear the sight of blood, and covered her face with her hands. 'Oh, what have I done—what have I done?' she cried. But she did not go to see, as any other girl would have done.

'I don't expect she's much hurt. It's a good job it wasn't her eye. That was a good shot of yours,' said the boy captain to Katherine.

There were boys as well as girls at the Preparatory School, and two were playing in this match.

Katherine looked at the little fellow—he was only twelve—with disapproval. 'It may be very well for you, but I call it dreadful for girls. She may be scarred for life,' she cried.

The boy captain thought this girl a very babyish one, and said nothing.

But now the group round the little goalkeeper parted, and she appeared at her place pale and furtively holding her swollen cheek. She was

received with a cheer, led by the youthful captain of the Preparatory School.

Katherine gasped, 'She's going to play again! Then I can't. Suppose I hit some one else!'

'But you won't. Pray don't be so silly, Katherine; you're spoiling the match,' said the girl next her.

There being nothing else for it, Katherine went on; but she was so afraid of hitting too hard that her play was not very good, and the Hilltop School very nearly won the match—which, though the team that was opposing them was the weakest in the school, or Katherine would not have been in it, would have been a deep disgrace to Nun's Eaton.

Miss Dolling meanwhile had gone to meet her sister and brother-in-law.

'It's no use your looking like that, Amy,' the latter called out as she approached. 'We could not get back for visiting-day, and Lettice was simply fretting herself to a shadow from want of Katherine.'

'You might at least have warned me,' said Miss Dolling—by which she meant asked her permission, and so the visitor interpreted it.

'Yes; and you would have forbid us to come. Besides, I always avoid visiting-days. You have a crowd round you, and give us about five minutes' interview. No, thank you.'

Miss Dolling smiled. She was a great autocrat at Nun's Eaton, and perhaps it was a relief to have some one who, while he admired, was not in the

least afraid of her, or even of her rules, and who came to see Amy Dolling and not the Head-mistress of the great girls' school. 'I am glad you have come to see *me*, because at present you can't see Katherine—at least to speak to—for she is playing in a match. But you can look at her from the window,' she added as she saw her sister's disappointed face.

'Katherine playing games! That is a new departure,' cried her father.

'Does she really enjoy it, Amy?' inquired Mrs Kerr doubtfully.

'Yes, of course; every healthy girl does or should. She looks much better than she used to do in town, and thanks to these and gymnastics she is losing that stoop of hers,' replied Miss Dolling.

Mrs Kerr looked pleased at this; and Major Kerr, who was watching the game out of the window, made running comments upon it and upon Katherine's play, which he applauded vigorously.

'I would take you out to watch it, but Katherine is not a practised enough player to endure such onlookers without being self-conscious and spoiling the match. She can't see you from here, and you can gratify her after it is over by praising her play.'

'By Jove! that's a good hit. Ah, she's wounded the goalkeeper!' cried the Major at Katherine's master-stroke.

'Oh dear!' cried Mrs Kerr, who began to think

games less desirable if hard knocks were part of them. She was ashamed of herself for the thought, but she rejoiced to think that at least it would have the effect of stopping the game. 'She's playing again!' she cried in surprised and disappointed accents.

'Of course; it would be thought cowardly to stop the game for that. My girls learn to give and take,' said Miss Dolling.

'Well, well, well, the old order changeth and giveth place to new. I don't know what will be the end of it; but I will say this: your girls turn out all right and womanly, though they seem to me to be boys in petticoats at present,' said the Major.

He and Miss Dolling had many amicable discussions on her view of womanhood of to-day, about which they disagreed; for the Major was old-fashioned in his ideas about women, and would have wrapped them in cotton-wool and protected them from every rough, wild blast.

'But the time is past for that, James; it's no good ignoring the march of time,' Miss Dolling would say; whereat the Major would sigh, shake his head, and say he supposed she was right.

'We have been to Craigie on our way from the north, and have all sorts of messages for Alistair,' said Mrs Kerr.

'Yes, I should think so. You should have seen the tenants crowding round to hear news of Miss

Alistair and bemoaning her absence. She 's a great person up north, and I wonder more and more that she has ever fitted into the school life,' said the Major.

'She is a very strong character, and does what she thinks is her duty—which is a rare thing now; and I am very glad to have her, though she is not an ordinary or altogether easy pupil to have,' observed Miss Dolling.

'Oh, well, Katherine will knock her into shape,' said Katherine's father.

But Katherine's aunt made no reply to this, only saying, 'The match is over, and we have won. Listen.'

Major and Mrs Kerr, listening, heard the visitors, who stood in a group, give three cheers for Nun's Eaton School—cheers which Katherine thought very odd cries. Then the victors in the opposite group cheered the vanquished visitors from the Preparatory School, after which the boy captain and the girl captain crossed the field and shook hands and congratulated each other on their play.

That ceremony over, the team ran off to tea, at which they entertained the visitors; and Miss Dolling, ringing the bell, sent for Katherine, who was soon in her mother's arms.

'And Alistair! Where is Alistair?' cried the Major after the first ten minutes, when the three were sitting talking together, Miss Dolling having left them.

Katherine's face fell, and she said coldly, 'I really don't know; she is not in the same form. She is in a lower form than I, and we don't play the same games, so I really see very little of her.'

'But you ride together, I am glad to hear, and she could teach a trick or two worth learning in riding,' observed the Major.

'We have a very good riding-master,' said Katherine quickly.

Her mother looked at her. 'I hope you are kind to your cousin, Katherine. Remember she is far from her parents and her home, and she must feel very strange here after her wild life at Craigie.'

'She behaves very wildly and strangely,' replied Katherine.

'What do you mean, Katherine? That is a very strange way to speak of Alistair,' said her father.

'Oh, I only mean that she says and does odd things that people don't do in society,' said Katherine.

Her father laughed. 'What do you know of society? You must be patient with her, Katherine. If you knew how they worship her at Craigie; that child was mistress, doctor, lawyer, and parson—— Eh, what?' exclaimed the Major, for Katherine gave an impatient exclamation at this last qualification.

'I don't like girls to be parsons and that kind of thing!' she said in explanation.

'Ah! I see, she rather stuffs providence down your throat; she has learnt that from her nurse,

old Jeanie, who is a most pious and good woman. I wish there were more old servants like her,' said her father.

Katherine did not echo this wish, nor did she show any desire to fetch Alistair, and it was Mrs Kerr who insisted and who surprised Alistair by the warmth of her greeting.

'It was good of you to go and see them all at Craigie,' said Alistair, her eyes wet and shining as she heard all the messages that had been sent her.

'I hope you will be friends with Katherine, though you are in different classes,' said Katherine's mother. And it is doubtful which of her hearers was most astonished at such a request from her.

The fact was that Mrs Kerr had been a little shocked by Katherine's self-satisfied letters, and had contrasted them with the ones Alistair had sent to her old nurse; and that, combined with a complete confidence in her sister's judgment, which was very favourable to Alistair, had opened the mother's eyes to her daughter's imperfections.

CHAPTER XXV.

GONE TO THE BOTTOM.

ALISTAIR little knew that the letter she had written to Jeanie, her old nurse, at Craigie, had been read by her uncle's wife, whose kindness made her ashamed of having repudiated the relationship. If she had had any idea that it would be seen by other eyes than those of her old nurse, it would never have been sent; but fortunately she did not know it, and the letter which touched and disturbed Mrs Kerr not a little was duly despatched and received by Jeanie; with the result that when Major and Mrs Kerr made a detour on their way south to see how Craigie was getting on in the absence of its owners and their young representative, Alistair, Jeanie came to Mrs Kerr one morning with a letter in her hand, and said, 'Would you be pleased to read that, ma'am? 'Tis from Miss Alistair, and it seems to me you have a right to read what she says.'

Alistair began by describing school and her life at Nun's Eaton, and then went on to say: 'I never forget what you said, that I must do my duty and pray for light to know what is right; but it is very hard, much harder than at Craigie, and I have not conquered my wicked temper, for, oh, Jeanie! it 's sorely tried here. There is one girl

who is my enemy—I don't know why; and she says wicked things about me, and the other day she hit my horse on the head just to make him run away. I can't love a girl like that; I can only despise her. I am very lonesome here, for I have no real friends; even my cousin prefers my enemy to me. I would love to be back at Craigie, but I'll try to do my duty here as you bade me,' repeated Alistair, as she wound up with all sorts of messages to her friends round Craigie.

So when Mrs Kerr was sitting in her sister's drawing-room having a little talk with her, she alluded to the matter of the ride, a very different version of which had reached her from Katherine, who, thanks to Alice, imagined that Alistair alone was to blame for the accident.

'If you have the courage to leave Katherine here for a year at least, it will do her a great deal of good; but she has some severe lessons to learn. If you would rather she learnt them later in life, take her away; but I think she will learn them more easily here, and I think Alistair will help her, when she has her eyes opened to see what kind of girl her cousin is,' said Miss Dolling, after she had told her sister the riding-master's tale of the disastrous ride.

'But why don't you send such a girl away? I don't want Katherine to make a friend of such a girl!' cried Mrs Kerr.

'I give every girl a fair chance first of reforming,

and I have still hopes of Alice; and as for Katherine, she has five hundred girls to choose from. It is her own fault if she chooses that particular one, and you are welcome to take her back with you to-day if you are afraid of the contact,' said Miss Dolling.

'No, I trust to you—I have spoilt Katherine too much, I know—if you think it will be safe.'

'Thank you, Lettice; I do think it will be safe, and do Katherine good in the end. Now come and make the acquaintance of Miss Caruthers and of Alice,' said the Head-mistress, leading the way to Lorne House.

It was the interval between tea and study, and the girls were all talking together or walking in the long, covered veranda outside Lorne House; and, as luck would have it, Katherine and Alice were walking along together, and the latter, in her loud, brusque way, was shouting some remark, not too polite, to another girl.

They did not see the Head-mistress and her sister approach, for their backs were turned, and they were taken aback when she said, 'Katherine, your mother is here and would like you to introduce your friend to her.'

For the first time, Katherine did not feel proud of her friendship with an Upper-Fifth girl, and when her mother looked at Alice and said, 'How do you do?' very politely, if not cordially, Katherine wished somehow that it had been Brenda or Davidine with whom she had been walking.

Alice shook hands rather awkwardly, for she felt certain Miss Dolling and Mrs Kerr had overheard her rude remark, though they said nothing, and she soon slipped away.

'I should not have guessed that you would have chosen that girl as a friend, but perhaps she has good qualities I do not know of,' was all Mrs Kerr said to her daughter, as they went to make Miss Caruthers's acquaintance; and shortly afterwards left.

Strange to relate, it was Alistair who enjoyed the visit of her relations the most; Katherine was very uncomfortable somehow, and rather angry that they should have made so much of Alistair.

Next day was a half-holiday, and snow covered the ground, so that play was out of the question.

'Those of you who skate may go to Miller's Pool, and the hockey-captains are going to pick up sides for a game on the ice,' announced Miss Caruthers at breakfast.

There was a shout of delight.

'Do you skate?' inquired Alice of Katherine.

'No; at least, not well,' replied the latter.

'What a bore! One gets so cold if one has to potter about learning,' said Alice, and then turned to Davidine, who was captain of the first hockey-team, to ask who was going to be in her team.

'You skate, of course, as you come from the north,' said Winifred to Alistair.

'Yes, of course; but I should not have thought

we have had cold enough yet for skating,' remarked Alistair.

'Oh, Miller's Pool freezes before any other water; and except in one spot where we do not go, it is not deep, so we are allowed to skate there when the lake here is not considered safe. I hope we shall be in the hockey match; it will be such fun,' cried Winifred.

'I don't think it will be fair to choose too many from Lorne House,' said Davidine; 'Brenda and Alice must be in my team.'

Winifred looked disappointed; but Alistair said good-naturedly, 'Never mind; I will teach you some figure-skating, if you don't know it.'

However, at the luncheon interval the captain of the other team came to Alistair and said, 'I hear you are not playing in the first hockey-team. Will you play with us against them? I expect you are more used to hockey on the ice than we are.'

'I don't know, because I don't know anything about an English winter; but if you can make up a team without me, I would rather not play to-day, thank you,' replied Alistair.

'Oh, very well,' said the other, who thought this was one of Alistair's queer ways, and who could easily make up a team without her, though she was the best player in the school.

The party started for Miller's Pool in brakes, under the charge of their various House-mistresses, and driven by Williams and his men, who drove

them as far as the ferry over the Thames, where they got out and crossed over in batches quite safely, and then walked on to the Pool, which was the name given to a broad and shallow part of the river, because there was a mill close by, and tradition had it that there was a deep pool at this point, where the Thames was very shallow.

Here the hockey-players took up their ground, and an exciting match began, while the other skaters kept to another part of the river, which had overflowed its banks and flooded a field, that was swept clean of its snow. Alistair put on her skates in a moment, and flew off down the field 'like a bird,' as Winifred observed, looking after her enviously, before she too struck out.

'Showing off,' muttered Alice to Katherine, as she gave the latter a parting nod before she went off to take up her place in the game.

But Katherine did not reply; she was feeling rather forlorn, as one after the other went off, after advice to her how to strike out, or sympathy as to the 'hard luck' it was not to skate well.

Presently she saw Alistair, hand-in-hand with Winifred, teaching her to skate backwards, and heard her merry laugh ring out as they both went down. Katherine turned her back on them, and struggled off in the other direction.

She had not gone very far, when she heard a voice say, 'Put your feet together, Katherine, and I'll take you for a skate round.'

Her feet happened to be together, for she was afraid to strike out, and before she knew where she was she was speeding along. 'Oh, take care!' she cried, as Alistair took her round a corner at full speed.

'No, that's just what you must not do on the ice; you must not mind a tumble or two. Now skate with me, will you? Take both my hands,' cried Alistair.

Alistair Comyns in the open air at sport was at her best. The girls forgot their prejudices and the insinuations of Alice as they watched her, or played fox and geese with her on the ice, and Katherine forgot her fears in the exhilaration of the new exercise.

'The whistle to go back!' exclaimed Winifred. 'Oh, what a pity! just as we were getting into the fun of it, after an hour and a half!'

There was no arguing or lingering, however, and the girls, in batches, went off to the ferry. The first two batches had gone over, and were quickly in the wagonette and on their way home. Among them was Katherine, who was glad to get her skates off, if the truth be known.

Alistair, Winifred, and Alice were in the last batch, which was a large one.

'I think we are too many for one time,' said Miss Caruthers to the ferryman.

'They won't hurt; the boat holds twenty grown men, so it can take thirty young girls,' replied the man.

'Stop!' cried Alice; 'I have left my watch on the banks of the Pool.'

'Make haste, then, and fetch it,' said Miss Caruthers, looking not too pleased at the delay, and annoyed at Alice's impolite manner.

Alice was some time, and the others stamped about on the bank to keep themselves warm. 'All right; push off!' said Alice, as she jumped into the boat.

Of course, it was the man's fault; he ought to have seen that the chain was undone, and not have taken Alice's order to 'push off' as meaning that she had unfastened it.

But, as he said afterwards, 'The young lady hooked it on again, when she wanted to stop us going, and I thought by her giving the order she'd unhooked it.'

Whoever was to blame, the fact remains that the chain was not undone, and that the ferryman 'pushed off' as directed, with the result that that end of the boat went under water, and the ferry-boat filled with water and sank with its freight of thirty girls and two mistresses.

Mercifully, all could swim more or less, or they would not have been allowed to go skating, and thanks to their short gymnastic skirts and their having their arms free, as they had only cloaks on, most of them swam to shore.

Miss Caruthers caught hold of and dragged several to shore, and Miss Eagen did the same.

Alistair swam to the aid of a girl who seemed in distres owing to her saturated cloak, and had just landed her when she saw Winifred disappear under the water, come up again, and disappear once more.

She plunged into the water again, and saw Winifred. 'Give me your hand!' Alistair cried to her.

'I can't! Leave me alone! I want to go to the bottom!' gasped and spluttered Winifred.

But Alistair had her by the arm, and would not let go. 'Come with me!' she repeated, shaking and struggling with Winifred, who tried to loose herself.

'I can't; my skates are at the bottom!' gasped Winifred, who, however, was getting chilled and exhausted.

'I'll get them if you'll go to shore,' said Alistair, whom the cold did not affect.

Winifred accordingly let herself be helped to shore, and Alistair dived for the skates, and at the second dive brought them up.

The girls had all taken shelter in the inn, and were sitting, laughing heartily, in a big upper room, taking off their dripping clothes and wrapping themselves in blankets.

There was a telephone in the village, and Miss Caruthers sent a message for more clothes. It had not long arrived at Nun's Eaton when Katherine with the rest of the party drove up to the door.

'Ah, you are safe, Katherine!' cried Miss Dolling as she clasped Katherine's hand and passed on rapidly.

'What does she mean?' inquired Katherine, bewildered by her aunt's pale and distracted air, and the consternation in the faces of the mistresses and servants who were there waiting to receive those who had arrived.

'Where is your cousin?' was the only answer she got.

'Coming in the last wagonette, I suppose. Something must have delayed it, for we saw no signs of it on the road,' replied Katherine.

'Run and get warm and have some tea,' said one of the mistresses kindly; and Katherine did so, but was puzzled at the pitying way the lady in question looked at her.

'They seemed to be very glad to see us safe back. I expect there has been a skating accident somewhere. There always is at the beginning of skating season,' said one of the girls.

'Yes; I am sure that is it. I heard some one say thirty girls went to the bottom,' joined in another.

'What!' exclaimed Katherine, and put down her cup, looking scared.

'What's the matter? It's no one we know, though of course it's very sad,' said the other, staring at Katherine's face of horror.

CHAPTER XXVI.

CHANGES OF FRIENDSHIP AND OTHER THINGS.

THE girls at the same table with Katherine were a little surprised at her. They were very sorry to hear rumours of a skating accident, but, girl-like, they forgot it after a few expressions of regret, and began to talk of their own afternoon. But Katherine did not drink her tea, though she had said, coming home in the brake, that she was hungry and frozen.

'Make haste, Katherine; we shall have to go to study directly. Here, drink this tea,' said a girl next to her.

Katherine took the cup with hands that trembled. 'I can't,' she said at last.

By this time the attention of Brenda was attracted to her House-mate, and she began to think Katherine had caught a chill; so, exerting her authority as monitor, she said kindly but determinedly, 'You must take some tea, Katherine. You are chilled. If you don't feel well, you had better go and tell Miss Caruthers and go to bed.'

'Is Miss Caruthers home, then?' inquired Katherine eagerly.

Brenda, who had not been with the skating-party, and knew nothing of the accident or the

delay, replied lightly, 'I suppose so, unless she has got stuck in the snow.'

'No, she isn't home, Brenda; and I believe Miss Dolling is in a paddy about it, though they won't tell us,' said one of the girls.

'I think I should like to go to Miss Dolling, please,' said Katherine, getting up from the tea-table and addressing the mistress in charge.

'Miss Wilson, she has not had any tea,' announced Brenda.

'Go to Miss Dolling, certainly, Katherine,' said Miss Wilson kindly; and added to the girls when Katherine had left the room, 'She is anxious about her cousin, no doubt.'

'Her cousin? What! that odd Scotch girl? I thought there was no love lost between them. What is she anxious about her for?' inquired one of the girls.

'She has not come back yet,' replied Miss Wilson, but gave no more information; and the girls dispersed to their different studies to prepare for next day.

It was not an easy thing to interview Miss Dolling, who was always very busy; and Katherine had never been to see her before except by invitation, and then only for a few minutes, when Miss Dolling had not seemed so nice or friendly as she used to be at home. But to-night Katherine forgot that it was the Head-mistress of the famous girls' school she was going to see, but Aunt Amy, to whom she turned in trouble.

She knocked at the door, and her aunt's voice said, 'Come in!' and added, 'Ah, Katherine!' as she held out her hand to her niece.

'Aunt Amy, what is the matter? Has anything happened to Alistair?' cried Katherine.

'I don't know, dear. I had a dreadful telephone message an hour ago telling of an accident to the ferry-boat, and now the line is broken and I can get no message through. But I have sent a messenger hot haste, and clothes and restoratives have been sent, and I am trusting and praying that no one is'—— Here Miss Dolling stopped, and was unable to go on.

'What was the message? Did they mention Alistair, Aunt Amy?' inquired Katherine.

Miss Dolling shuddered. 'I was not here to receive it, but the maid who did said the ferry-boat had gone to the bottom with thirty girls; and Miss Caruthers begged for dry clothes, which I immediately sent by Williams, who went back himself. And I tried to get on the telephone, but found it had broken down at the other end. It did not occur to me that there was anything serious at first, for the girls can all swim.'

'Then why are you frightened now?' asked Katherine.

'I am not really frightened. I do not believe that any harm has come to the girls or any of the party,' said Miss Dolling, who had mastered her emotion by this time. 'It was just foolish

listening to rumours. The maid or some one started the tale that they were all drowned; but, of course, they are not, or why should they send for dry clothes? They would have sent for me. So do not cry, Katherine. I am glad you are fond of your cousin after all.'

'Oh, Aunt Amy, I'm sure she is drowned!' cried Katherine.

'Nonsense! Why should you be sure of such a dreadful thing?' cried Miss Dolling.

'I don't know. Only I feel as if something dreadful has happened. And, oh, Aunt Amy, Alistair was so kind to me to-day!' cried Katherine.

'I am glad you are beginning to appreciate her. Your conscience is beginning to reproach you, I see. But Alistair is so good at all out-door sports that I do not fear for her; so stop trembling, Katherine. I had no idea you were so nervous; and how cold your hands are! Have you had tea?'

'I couldn't take it,' said Katherine with chattering teeth.

'Nonsense!' repeated Miss Dolling, and she rang the bell and ordered tea for two; the fact being that she had now remembered that she herself had not had any tea.

They had just finished drinking it when a telegram arrived, sent from the next village to Miller's Pool: 'All safe, warm, and dry.'

'You see what comes of listening to gossip and letting one's imagination run away with one; and you see, also, how one's conscience torments one when one has been unkind to another, and fears that she may not have a chance of undoing that unkindness,' observed Miss Dolling as she sent Katherine off to her studies after kissing her, 'as she used to do,' Katherine felt.

Very soon after this the capsized party arrived in the highest of spirits, with one exception.

'We've had such fun! We would not have missed it for the world. You should have seen all the girls floundering about in the water with their cloaks spread out like water-lily leaves!' cried one of the party.

'Yes; but we had to get rid of our water-lily leaves pretty quickly or we should have been weighed down with them. Phyllis was nearly drowned, only Alistair pulled her out.'

'Yes, Alistair swims like a fish with one hand,' cried another girl.

There was a shout of laughter at this. 'What does a fish's hand look like?' they inquired.

'Oh, well, that was two sentences put together to save time. But you should see her dive for skates.'

'You seem to have been indulging in a swimming display. I should not have said it was the time or the season,' observed Miss Dolling, who had come up to the group and overheard this speech.

'It was for Winnie's skates. She nearly drowned herself trying to dive for them, because they were silver; so Alistair got them for her. And all Winifred said when she was safe and wrapped up in blankets was, "I am thankful my skates are saved!"'

'I am thankful you are all safe. And now you will, please, all go straight to bed and have hot bread-and-milk, or whatever the doctor prescribes for you, Miss Caruthers and Miss Eagen and all,' declared Miss Dolling, after the laugh over Winifred and her anxiety about her precious skates had subsided.

So to bed they all went, and were dosed by the school doctor—a lady who lived on the premises—and thanks to good, healthy constitutions, no ill results followed their impromptu bath in the Thames.

There was one girl who did not join in the laugh about Winifred, but was so silent that the Head-mistress was half-afraid she felt the shock or had caught a chill, and that was Alice, who was generally so noisy that her silence was noticed.

However, she, like her companions, escaped without even a cold, and as she had no particular friends except Katherine, of whom she did not take much notice now, preferring to walk backwards and forwards to school and play by herself, her company was not sought by her schoolfellows. Nor did Katherine seek Alice.

'Those two have quarrelled. I thought that friendship would not last long; they are too different in character,' observed Brenda a few days after.

'It 's very often opposites in character who make the best friends,' said Davidine.

'Yes; but those two have really nothing in common. Alice is not fond of work or of reading, nor is she refined; whereas Katherine is. I rather like Katherine,' declared Brenda.

'She is less conceited than she was. I think her friendship with Alice did her no good. But I like Alistair best,' replied Davidine.

'I know you do,' said Brenda, who was a little jealous of Davidine's friendliness to a girl so much younger than herself.

But they had no more time for talk, for a message came from Miss Caruthers inviting the girls of Lorne House to a consultation about dresses for the Advertisement Ball.

'Miss Eagen and I have an idea for our own dresses, but we want to know first if you have all got your costumes,' said Miss Caruthers to the assembled girls.

'Oh dear! I had forgotten all about it. I have been so busy bookbinding, in every odd minute, to get some slippers done for Christmas,' cried a girl who was noted for her Irish bulls.

'They will be literary slippers, then,' laughed Miss Eagen.

'Oh, I meant busy in the bookbinding-shop,

where I am decorating some leather slippers. It's just like decorating and binding a book,' explained the girl.

'I have not seen about mine either,' said Davidine, and Brenda echoed this remark.

'That is all the better, and was what I expected and half-hoped,' was Miss Caruthers's reply, who smiled at the surprise of the girls.

'Yes, because we want you to make part of our group, some of you, if you have not any plans of your own. Miss Caruthers and I want to be "Mellin's Food," and we want some babies,' put in Miss Eagen.

'Babies, Miss Eagen? But Davidine and Brenda are too big!' the girls cried in amazement.

'That will be all the more original and amusing,' insisted Miss Eagen.

'That's true,' said Davidine; 'it will be easy to get long, white, babies' frocks and bonnets. But how can you be the food?'

'That's a secret; but as you belong to it, if you promise not to let it go further, we will tell you our costumes are to be made of cardboard in the carpenters' shop.'

Carpentry was taught by a mistress, as was book-binding, and the carpenters' shop or room was the place where all properties for pageants and plays were made and stored, and contained a most extraordinary collection of things, all made by the carpentry mistress and her pupils.

The girls promised to keep the secret, 'which will not be difficult, as we don't see how it 's going to be done,' they said.

'What are you going to be, Alice?' asked Davidine good-naturedly, as she noticed that the girl was not taking any part in the discussion.

'I don't know,' said Alice, very much as if she did not care either.

'Why not be a baby?' asked Brenda.

'I thought you had a fancy-dress coming from town?' said Katherine.

'Yes; I was to have been a Dutch girl in the advertisement of tours to Holland. But I have not written for it,' said Alice indifferently.

'Oh, do write! You have a lot of Dutch ornaments that would look so pretty on your cap and costume!' said Winifred.

'All right,' said Alice, and sat down to do so.

'Is she ill, do you think?' asked Brenda.

'I don't know. There is something the matter; she is quite changed. I wonder if I ought to ask her?' said Davidine doubtfully.

'I think you ought. I believe she has had some bad news from home. She doesn't seem to care about anything now,' observed Brenda.

'It is ever since that ice accident. I wonder whether she got some internal injury that we don't know of, or whether it is the shock to her nerves,' remarked Davidine.

'If it is anything of that kind, she ought to tell

Miss Caruthers,' said Brenda decidedly, 'and let the doctor see her.'

Davidine accordingly waited for Alice after study, and taking her aside under pretext of discussing her dress, said, 'Alice do you feel ill?'

Alice apparently did not expect or like the remark, and said brusquely, 'I ill? Not in the least. Why should you imagine such a thing? Do I look ill?'

'No, you look quite well; it is only that you seem so quiet, and don't take an interest in anything. Is there anything the matter, Alice?' asked Davidine kindly.

Alice's eyes filled with tears; but she replied decidedly, 'Nothing whatever, thank you.'

There was no more to be said; but Davidine just mentioned the matter to Miss Caruthers, and added, 'Brenda frightened me by talking of a shock or internal injuries in that ice accident.'

'I don't think there is any fear of that. Alice could not play games as she does if she had hurt herself in any way, and her nerves seem all right. She never starts if you speak to her. But I have noticed the change, and will see what can be done,' said Miss Caruthers.

But for some little time Alice was just the same —'sulky,' some of the girls said, and 'down in the dumps,' according to the more charitable ones.

It was not Miss Caruthers nor Davidine who succeeded in curing the 'sulks' or the 'dumps;' nor were they cured for some little time, as has been said.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE ADVERTISEMENT DANCE.

THE evening of the Advertisement Dance came. Miss Dolling allowed these dances to take place on condition that they did not take up too much of the girls' attention and time, and they were only allowed to last two hours, as every one had to be in bed by ten o'clock or a little after.

Alice's dress arrived, and she looked very well in it, being plump and round-faced, and 'rather like a Dutch doll,' as her critical schoolfellows said.

Miss Dolling and one or two of the elder mistresses, who were not in costumes, were on the platform of Big School to judge the costumes and award the prize for the most original costume.

Katherine's mother had sent her down from town a beautiful Greek dress, which was a copy of some artistic advertisement, and the wearer looked very well in it.

Winifred waited for Alistair, and gave a cry of disappointment when she saw her. 'Why, Alistair, are you not coming to the Advertisement Dance, then?' she asked.

'Certainly. What do you mean? It is not time yet, is it?' she replied.

'It is five-and-twenty past seven, and we are

to be ready for the march past at half-past seven sharp, the invitation said,' protested Winifred.

'It won't take us five minutes to walk down to Big School. Besides, Miss Caruthers told us to meet her and Miss Eagen here at 7.30,' said Alistair.

'Yes; but it will take you more than five minutes to dress,' cried Winifred.

'No, it won't; I have only to put a shawl over my head,' replied Alistair calmly.

Winifred's face was a study. 'You can't be serious! You don't mean to go to the dance wrapped up in a shawl?' she remonstrated. She had hoped that Alistair was getting more like other girls, but this was very odd of her.

'I thought it was decided that I should go as a Scotch fisher-girl?' explained Alistair.

'Yes; but like a proper fisher-girl,' objected Winifred.

'Pray what is a proper fisher-girl like?' inquired Alistair, half-amused and half-annoyed.

'With a striped petticoat and a turned-up skirt, a tartan shawl over her shoulders, and a fishing-basket on her head,' said Winifred.

'I have not seen a single fisher-woman with a striped petticoat. That's the kind of person you see on the stage or in pictures,' said Alistair rather scornfully.

But Winifred caught at the admission. 'It's the picture you have to represent, not real life,' she explained naïvely. 'Oh, do be quick and dress up

somehow! You'll offend the girls if you go as you are.'

Alistair looked grave for a moment. 'I don't wish to do that, if they are really so silly as to mind how I dress; I remember now they did say it was an Advertisement Dance. How did you say this picture fisher-girl was dressed?' she asked.

'One had a pink-and-white striped petticoat and a blue overskirt turned back to form a pocket, and a square, red-tartan handkerchief over her shoulders, and the basket on her back; and the other had a crimson petticoat and brown dress and a green-tartan shawl. You have a tartan shawl. Couldn't you tear off a piece just for to-night?' pleaded Winifred, who was most anxious that her friend should look well.

'I have a crimson petticoat, as it happens, but I couldn't cut up the Comyns tartan. Never mind, I'll do my best to please you,' replied Alistair, as she left Winifred and ran lightly upstairs to the dormitory.

Not long after she had gone, there came a sound of shuffling feet along the passage and a sound of laughter, then two extraordinary figures appeared.

Winifred, who, as has been said, was not very quick of understanding, stood and gaped at the sight of two large tins of 'Mellin's Food,' with the labels and directions for use written large upon them, while above them appeared the heads of Miss Caruthers and Miss Eagen, who stretched out their

hands from little slits in the side of the round cardboard tins, and, hand-in-hand, shuffled along, rather awkwardly, it must be confessed, in their original fancy-dress.

There were heard titters, and then peals of laughter and much clapping of hands, as the babies in frilled caps and long frocks, much betrimmed with baby ribbon, came tripping along and saw their food.

'It's spendid, Miss Caruthers. How did you think of such a thing?' cried Davidine.

'Miss Eagen thought of it; but I wish it felt splendid.'

'May I have the pleasure of the first waltz, Miss Eagen?' cried another of the girls.

'Miss Caruthers should have that honour, I think,' replied Miss Eagen, giving her 'tin' a twitch to get her hand out a little farther.

'Indeed, it will be as much as I can do to shuffle round Big School for the march past,' declared Miss Caruthers with a smile.

'We will do a double-shuffle,' declared Miss Eagen, who as usual was in high spirits, and had incited her friend Miss Caruthers to this frivolity.

'Who is this? Oh, Katherine Kerr!' cried Davidine, as Katherine, in her flowing white Greek dress with gold trimmings, and gold fillets round her head, came along with dignified steps.

'That is a very pretty dress. You do Lorne House credit,' said Miss Caruthers.

'And she is exactly like the picture—nose and all,' cried one of the girls.

'Alice is nice too,' continued Miss Caruthers, saying a word of praise to each girl as her eye fell upon her.

'We are all here now, are we not? Then we had better start,' she said at last.

'Oh, please, Miss Caruthers, do wait a minute for Alistair! She did not understand that she had to dress up properly to be a Scotch girl,' begged Winifred.

'Nor did I,' observed Miss Eagen dryly.

'She must not be long, then. Perhaps you had better go and hurry her, Winifred; we must not keep Miss Dolling waiting,' suggested Miss Caruthers.

Winifred sped upstairs to Alistair's cubicle, and, pulling the curtain, said, 'Miss Caruthers wants to start, please, Alistair;' then stood still in surprise. For Alistair, in bare feet, with a basket over her shoulder and a handkerchief over her head, a tartan shawl over her shoulders, and a red petticoat showing under her turned-up blue-serge skirt, looked quite like the girl in the picture. 'But, Alistair!' gasped Winifred.

'What is the matter? Don't I look all right?' inquired Alistair merrily.

'Yes, but'—— gasped Winifred again.

'But what? Don't you wonder where I got the basket? I found it in the packing-room; it is not unlike the fisher-women's creel.'

'Yes; it's quite nice; but—your feet, Alistair! You've got no stockings on!' cried Winifred.

'Nor had the girl in the picture, I'm sure, unless the artist had never been to the sea. At any rate, a Scotch fisher-lassie would never have them on, and I shall not. I shall feel quite at home to-night,' declared Alistair.

There was no time to say more, for Davidine's voice was heard telling them that Miss Caruthers was starting, and by the time the two arrived at the bottom of the stairs the procession had started, and to Winifred's joy no one seemed to notice Alistair's footgear, or, rather, want of footgear.

When the Lorne House party appeared, there was great clapping from the Wales girls, and much amusement over 'Mellin's Food' and its babies, and again Winifred breathed freely, for Alistair passed muster with the rest.

And now came the march past, and a whisper, which rose to a murmur, went round the room. 'Just look at the Scotch girl; she has no shoes or stockings on. She can't have walked from Lorne House barefoot! Well, really, what mad thing will she do next?'

Miss Caruthers saw that there was something wrong, and looked at Alistair. 'Well done, Alistair; you have been most plucky to walk over sharp stones barefoot!' she exclaimed. But Miss Caruthers, it will be remembered, had a very quiet voice, and only two or three girls near her heard her remark.

Alistair felt the disapproval round her, but held her head high as she took her place in the procession for the march past.

'Alistair, my hockey-boots are in the cloak-room quite near; I left them there by mistake; they would fit you, if you like to wear them,' whispered Winifred to her.

Alistair shook her head very decidedly; she had Miss Caruthers's approval, and her own conscience was clear of any wish to offend. 'I am a Scotch fisher-lass, and we don't wear shoes or stockings when we're fishing,' she declared.

If it had been any one but Alistair, it would probably have been laughed at and applauded; but it was a case of giving a dog a bad name. Alistair had a name for eccentricity, and here was another proof of it.

Katherine looked at her cousin, and her self-consciousness made her feel dreadfully uncomfortable.

Fortunately for Alistair, Miss Dolling, who seemed to know by intuition what was being felt by her pupils, discovered the state of affairs. She waited till the march past was over, and then standing on the platform, she asked in her clear, ringing voice, 'Can the orchestra play a Highland reel? Because if so, I will ask my young relative to dance for us.'

The girls' orchestra was very proud of its ability to play anything it was called upon to do, and eagerly announced their readiness to do so.

'That is right.—Then, Alistair, will you come up on to the platform and dance for us? You had better unfasten your basket. I hope your undeformed feet will not cause your schoolfellows to be too envious.'

Alistair only laughed, as she leapt lightly on to the platform — a feat in itself that made the gymnasts envious. 'I'll dance with pleasure,' she said; and she did dance.

There was a little surprise, and then the girls—some of them to please Miss Dolling, and many of them because they were pleased themselves—applauded long and loud. 'Let's have an encore!' they cried, and they went on applauding till Miss Dolling laughingly called to Alistair to come and give them another jig, which she did.

'How many of you would dare to show your feet?' asked Miss Dolling, and then by some means or other managed to keep Alistair near her and made much of her; and it began to dawn upon the girls that they had made a mistake, and that it was originality in Alistair Comyns, and unconventionality, which made her unlike other people —not eccentricity; and Alistair's popularity, which had been confined to games, began to grow, and her unpopularity at other times to decrease, while her influence began to be felt.

There was another reason for the change of popular opinion, and that was that Alice, who had hitherto fanned the flame, now ceased to do so;

and somehow—the girls themselves could not have said how or why—as Alistair went up in their estimation and was sought out, Alice went down and was left alone.

However, this evening at least she was much admired, for her Dutch ornaments were very handsome.

Miss Dolling looked carefully at each girl as she passed by, and consulted with the judges. The 'Rhubarb Girl,' with a dress very cleverly representing sticks of rhubarb, with a green leaf frill, was so realistic that it gained many marks from the judges. 'Mellin's Food' was not for competition, but it was adjudged the most original. Eventually a 'Newspaper Girl,' with the latest telegrams written all over her, gained the first prize; and then dancing went merrily on, though 'Mellin's Food,' as it had said, was content to lean against the wall.

'Are you afraid to dance with me, Alistair?' inquired Davidine after the first dance—which she had given to Brenda—was over.

'Afraid of what? The Comynses do not know what fear is,' said Alistair, with one of her bursts of pride; and then, as usual, she corrected herself. 'But I'm only a fisher-lass, and that was foolish pride. Why should I be afraid, Davidine?'

'Of your toes being stamped upon,' said the other.

'Oh, there is no fear; I will keep out of the way of your shoes,' said Alistair, as she started off with Davidine.

'I believe that is true, Alistair, what you said,' observed Davidine.

'That I will keep out of the way of your shoes?'

'No; that you are never afraid. You are not afraid of being laughed at, are you?'

'No. Are you?' inquired Alistair.

Davidine nodded. 'I like being popular, and I should be afraid to do anything unpopular,' she declared.

'I never thought of that. What does it matter if it's right?' said Alistair simply.

'Yes, that is true; I will think of that,' said Davidine, and then, thinking this was serious conversation for a waltz, she began to talk of something else.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE MYSTERY OF THE CHALLENGE-CUPS.

'MISS DOLLING did that very cleverly,' observed Brenda to Davidine when they were talking over the Advertisement Dance together.

'She always does; she wouldn't be Miss Dolling if she didn't,' replied Davidine.

'No, that's just it; she always does know what to do. The fact is, she understands us just as if she were a girl herself,' said Brenda.

'Anyway, she's stopped that nonsense about Alistair Comyns,' declared Davidine with satisfaction.

'Is it nonsense?' began Brenda.

But Davidine broke in with decision. 'Yes, it is nonsense, and you ought to know better than to try to keep it up, Brenda.'

'Oh come, Davidine, you need not ride such a high horse; it is not so long since you felt her rather an uncomfortable person to have to do with,' protested Brenda.

Davidine laughed. 'I am taking a leaf out of Alistair's book, and doing what I consider my duty,' she said.

'Well, please, don't do it with me; it makes you an uncomfortable person too,' replied Brenda.

'I won't, on condition that you promise to help me to put an end to this stupid idea that the girls have, that Alistair has a "screw loose," as they call it.'

'I will promise that willingly enough, for I do think it dreadful to say a thing like that about any girl; and, do you know, it was Alice who started it. I wonder why?' said Brenda.

'Jealousy, I suppose, is at the bottom of most spiteful things that girls do—jealousy and want of thought; and, by the way, talking of want of thought, I have not put up a notice about the lecture to-night. I must put one in the study at once,' exclaimed Davidine, hastening her steps as she spoke.

'It doesn't matter; the girls could see it if they chose in Big School; it is on the notice-board there,' said Brenda.

'They could, but they could also make it an excuse for not turning up to-night if the subject did not happen to interest them, which it may not do, as it it is on "Brass Rubbings," and only a few of the girls go in for that. At any rate, I should have it on my conscience,' declared Davidine.

'Pray don't develop an abnormal conscience, Davidine,' cried Brenda impatiently. 'It's so unpleasant.'

Davidine laughed, and then she said, 'I don't want to be unpleasant, but I do think we rather shirk what is unpleasant—we girls, I mean—and

that is why I admire Alistair so much, because she never thinks of that; but I have only had one chum all my school-life, and do not want another. I hope that that chum is not going to get jealous of any one I am friendly with.'

Brenda put her hand on the other's shoulder for a moment, and said, 'Not I,' and peace was restored. They were not given to being demonstrative at Nun's Eaton.

Davidine duly affixed her notice to the board, and the girls crowded round to see what the news was.

'Only a stupid old lecture! I'm sure I don't want to go,' said one girl.

'You're not asked, so you need not worry yourself,' observed Davidine.

'Not asked! What awful cheek! Why am I not asked? I shall certainly come,' retorted the other, the fact of her not being invited immediately making her want to go.

'Don't be absurd, Phyllis; you don't belong to the Brass Rubbing Society. What do you want to go for?' demanded Brenda.

'Begging your pardon, I know a lot more than you; we've got some awfully fine brasses in our church at home, and I did think of taking a rubbing of them when I go home, and presenting it to the school, but I certainly sha'n't now,' declared Phyllis.

The others laughed ironically, for Phyllis was

noted for the wonderful things she was always going to do, and never did.

'It's a dead loss to Big School,' said Brenda, for the best 'rubbings' made by the girls were hung up round Big School, together with picked sketches and other works of art executed by the girls.

'Oh, well, I'll have my revenge,' said Phyllis, nodding her head.

'I'm sure I don't want to go. Besides, it's nothing personal to you; it's only the Fifth and Sixth that are asked; and as far as that goes, I dare say if you asked leave they'd let you go, especially if you held out the bait of a handsome "rubbing" for the walls of Big School,' said another Fourth-Form girl.

'No, I've changed my mind; I sha'n't bother about the lecture or the rubbing either,' announced Phyllis.

So the elder girls went off to the lecture, and Lorne House was left in charge of the younger ones, who were told to behave properly and learn their lessons as if a monitor were present.

As a rule, so strong was the sense of responsibility among the elder ones that Miss Caruthers had rarely to come into the study or complain of noise; and as a rule, too, the younger girls, when appealed to on an occasion like this, promised good behaviour.

But this evening Davidine was so sure that they could get into no mischief that she made no

special appeal, and only told them to behave properly.

Katherine went with the others, not that she cared particularly about 'brass rubbing,' but because she liked lectures, and she liked being considered one of the elder ones.

Alistair of course was among the uninvited ones, and as she had no wish to go, was quite contented learning her lessons, when Phyllis suddenly exclaimed, 'I say, girls, I proclaim a holiday.

The girls, about ten in number, looked up in astonishment. 'What nonsense are you up to now, Phyllis?' inquired one of them.

'I propose that we do no work to-night as a protest against our unjust exclusion from this lecture.'

'But we never do go to the Upper School lectures, and it would be a horrid bore if we did have to go,' objected Winifred.

'We go to the lectures on general subjects like this, and it is an outrage on our liberties,' declared Phyllis, who was occasionally somewhat vague in her statements.

'If we don't learn our lessons we shall only get into a row to-morrow, and that's all the good our protest will do us,' declared Winifred.

'I'm going to learn my lessons, and I don't see any injustice in our not being allowed to go to the lecture to-night,' said Alistair.

'Oh, you! of course you're a saint,' sneered Phyllis, who was in a bad humour this evening.

'No, I'm not; I wish I were,' said Alistair coolly.

Phyllis turned her back upon Alistair. Since the night of the dance, when Miss Dolling had championed Alistair and her 'ways,' the girls had not dared or wished to shun her Yet some of them still disliked her; Phyllis was one.

'Look here; hurry up and learn your lessons and I'll tell you of a wonderful idea I have about'—— Here Phyllis lowered her voice. The girls, with the exception of Alistair and Winifred—who, after a moment's indecision, kept her seat and went on with her lessons—all clustered round Phyllis, who was evidently telling them her wonderful idea, and presently there was a burst of applause and a great clapping of hands. Then steps were heard along the passage, and the girls scurried back to their desks and buried their heads in their books.

The door opened and Miss Caruthers looked in. She was not in the least deceived by the silence and order that reigned. 'There has been too much noise here. Please do not let me hear any more,' she said quietly, and disappeared.

'There! Look how deceitful you have made us appear!' protested Winifred.

'If the cap fits, wear it,' said Phyllis, not very apropos; but she did not speak again, and in about half-an-hour she opened her desk, put her books in, and shut it rather noisily.

About half-a-dozen other girls immediately put away their books and left the room as quietly as possible.

'Where on earth have they gone? They have no business to leave the study like that before time,' exclaimed Winifred to Alistair when the two found themselves alone in the study.

Alistair, who was not yet quite used to feel that at school one was not free to walk in and out of rooms as one liked, shrugged her shoulders. 'I don't know. What does it matter? It is all the better for us, because we can do our arithmetic prep. aloud, and I can help you.'

The two accordingly began their arithmetic, and in their interest at working out a difficult problem spoke louder than they were aware, and this time Miss Eagen appeared. 'Alistair and Winifred! You're alone? Where are the others?'

'I don't know, Miss Eagen. They've finished their prep., I believe,' said Winifred, trying to shield them.

Presently steps were heard overhead. Miss Eagen turned and went to the dormitory, from which direction she heard whispers.

'Go down to the study at once, girls; you know you have no business up here. This is what comes of the monitors all being at a lecture. Next time one will have to stop and look after you, as you are not to be trusted alone, and she will be very angry at your depriving her of the pleasure of the lecture,' said Miss Eagen, as she swept the girls down before her.

They seemed very much subdued and crest-

fallen, and behaved very well for the rest of the evening.

Next morning, when the girls came down to breakfast, Miss Caruthers met them with a grave face. 'I have bad news for you, girls,' she said. 'The Cups have been stolen in the night!'

'The Cups—our Cricket and Tennis Cups!' cried Davidine, looking quite pale.

'Yes; the Cricket Cup has been taken off the mantelpiece in the study, and the Tennis Cup off the table,' said Miss Caruthers. 'I thought you ought to know at once.'

'What a dreadful thing!' cried Phyllis excitedly.

Davidine took no notice of Phyllis. She had not helped to win the Cups, so she need not have been so excited; but then Phyllis always did get excited over everything; and, after all, it was a loss to them all, for these two Cups were trophies won in the games.

'Have you sent for the police, Miss Caruthers?' inquired Davidine.

'The police!' echoed Phyllis.

'Yes, of course; I sent and told them this morning, and the inspector has already been down; but he says he cannot imagine how the thief got in, because the windows and doors were all fastened last night before we went to bed,' said Miss Caruthers.

'Are you quite sure the maid did not leave one open?' inquired Brenda.

'Quite; because I went round and saw to that myself, as I do every night,' replied Miss Caruthers.

'Perhaps one of us walks in her sleep, and opened the door, or went for a midnight stroll.—Did you, Alistair?' demanded Brenda.

She did not mean any harm; it had flashed across her that she had heard of Alistair's taking a walk one evening very late.

The girls all looked at Alistair, who said very angrily, 'I? No; I did not go out last night,' and grew very red.

The breakfast over, every one went into the study to look at the vacant places where the Cups had been, and then at the window, the hasp of which was unbroken and shut to.

'It's most mysterious,' said Phyllis.

But the others said nothing. It was too serious for accusations to be bandied about; but they all had a feeling that the thief was in the house and not outside, and they felt that Miss Caruthers shared their belief, though she did not say so.

'I say, Phyllis, here's a nice business!' cried one of the younger Lorne girls to her as they were going down to the School House.

'Oh, be quiet, and don't bother me! The Cups *must* be found, and I am thinking how it is to be managed,' she replied irritably.

'Well, if you know how that is to be done, it's more than I do,' said the other, going off.

The Lorne House Cups were lost! The whole

school was in a ferment, and a rush was made to their own studies to see that their trophies occupied their usual place.

'We shall never feel safe again!' cried the captain of Wales House.

'They are not of such great value; it looks like spite, only there is no one to be spiteful,' said another captain to Davidine.

'It's a very uncomfortable affair altogether,' replied Davidine.

'We are all awfully sorry for you. We shall have to give you a signed address about it, and you must hang it over the place where the Cup was,' suggested another.

But before the day was over, another surprise was sprung upon Lorne House, and the whole school, for the matter of that.

'Miss Caruthers,' said Alistair, coming in with two Cups in her hand, 'I have found the Cups.'

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE MYSTERIOUS FIND.

ALISTAIR, her hair blown about by the wind, stood with two silver Cups, to which some damp mould clung, in her hands.

Miss Caruthers was in the hall, having just come in from a walk, and about half-a-dozen girls were passing through it on their way from the playing-fields to take off their boots and cloaks before they went in to tea.

Mistress and girls stood still, and stared for a moment at Alistair standing there with a bright colour in her face from the cold air, and an air of suppressed excitement about her.

Then Miss Caruthers came forward, and said in her quiet way, 'I am so glad. Where did you find the Cups, Alistair?'

'In the ground; they were buried just under my cubicle-window,' said Alistair.

The girls cast glances at each other, and remembered what Brenda had carelessly said about people walking in their sleep.

'Oh, what a curious place to bury them! How did you happen to find them?' inquired Miss Caruthers.

'I saw that the earth had been newly dug up, and I scraped a little and found the Cups,' replied Alistair.

'We must tell the police, and have the place viewed, so as to track the thieves. I suppose they buried them there for safety,' observed Miss Caruthers, and she went off with the Cups to see Miss Dolling.

The girls, left to themselves, talked eagerly about this mysterious find.

'How did she know where to look?' said one girl.

'It's very uncanny,' said another.

'I believe she hid them there herself,' said a third. 'Not on purpose, of course, but in her sleep, or something,' she added at sight of Winifred's indignant face.

'Why not accuse her of kleptomania at once?' cried Winifred angrily.

'We don't do anything of the sort; but you must admit that it is very odd,' said another girl.

'I don't admit anything of the kind. It's very odd that whatever Alistair does is wrong, according to you all; and now that she has found your Cups for you, that is how you repay her!' protested Winifred.

'We are grateful to her for finding them, but we should be still more grateful if they had never been lost; and I should like to know who buried them in the ground.'

'What does it matter as long as they have been found? What's the good of making a fuss over what is past and done with?' said Phyllis from the background.

But Davidine, who had come in and overheard these last words, exclaimed, 'It is not over and done with; and I for one shall not rest till I get to the bottom of the mystery, and Miss Caruthers is of the same opinion. The thief must be found, or they 'll be taking them again.'

'I don't fancy it was a thief who buried those Cups,' said Alistair.

'I don't know what you call thieving, but it 's what we call it here,' said Brenda rather curtly.

Alistair took no notice except to hold her head high, as she always did when spoken to rudely.

'What a fuss about nothing!' said Phyllis, and walked away as if tired of the discussion.

Davidine turned to Alistair to ask her why she said it was not a theft; but Alistair, too, had gone away, and Davidine, with a sigh, said, 'The whole thing is very worrying.'

'I wish it was ended. Surely, as the Cups are found, there is no need for the police to have anything more to do with it?' suggested Katherine.

Davidine did not reply; but Brenda said very kindly, 'You see, they don't like having a mystery unsolved, and they want to catch the thief; but if it should turn out to be—a—one of the girls, I mean, by mistake or anything, of course that would end the matter; only the girl ought to confess. I should tell her so if I knew her.'

Katherine sat with knitted brows; then she rose and went in search of Alistair. 'Please, Alistair, I

hope you won't mind, but if you did take those Cups by mistake'—— Here Katherine caught Alistair's eyes, which were literally blazing with wrath.

'How dare you?' she said, almost choking with rage. 'And you my own cousin!'

Katherine was frightened, and tried to stammer an apology. 'I beg your pardon,' she said.

'You do right to ask my pardon, and the others had better do so too. Why do they think such dreadful things of me? Do I look a thief or a lunatic?' Alistair demanded. Then her wrath cooled down, and she said humbly, 'But I need to beg your pardon too; I have frightened you with my temper. I will not do so again. But, Katherine, why do you keep aloof from me? What is it that prevents our being friends?' she wound up wistfully.

'I am friends; at least I want to be,' said Katherine.

'It is not being a friend to believe ill things of me—to accuse me, your own cousin, of stealing things,' said Alistair reproachfully.

'I only meant it kindly. I did not imagine you stole them. I thought you had done it in your sleep and remembered it afterwards, and I wanted to save you trouble,' explained Katherine.

'Thank you; but I do not walk in my sleep, and I never buried those Cups, sleeping or waking,' said Alistair gravely.

She looked Katherine full in the face, and suddenly the latter held out her hand. 'I am sure

of it, and I will not allow any one to say such a thing before me.'

'Thank you,' said Alistair, and she looked very pleased, and they went into study.

'Well, Alistair, I hear you have been a magician and found the Cups! That is what comes of being of an observant nature. No doubt all you girls passed the very spot without noticing anything unusual in that flower-bed,' said Miss Dolling, coming in to congratulate Lorne House on the recovery of its treasures.

'We didn't know they were buried there,' said a girl impulsively.

Miss Dolling turned swiftly upon her. 'Naturally you did not know it, but neither did Alistair. That is where her cleverness came in, and her Highland eyes,' she said.

No one dared to say any more, and Miss Dolling continued: 'I hope the thief will be caught. It won't do to allow our Cups to be stolen out of our studies; so we shall have to make an example of him when he is discovered.'

There was dead silence, and Miss Dolling left the room.

At supper there was nothing else talked of but the mysterious loss and recovery of the Cups.

Miss Caruthers at her end of the table was, for her, quite talkative that evening, and Miss Eagen was full of it at the other end.

What I think is that it was so clever of the

thief to have got in without unlocking the door or windows,' she declared.

Davidine looked keenly at the lady-housekeeper; but she was helping herself to salt, and her expression could not be seen. 'Then you think he is in the house?' she observed at last.

'I hope we have no thieves in Lorne House!' Miss Eagen exclaimed.

'I do not think we have,' said Alistair.

'Then what is your explanation?' asked Davidine.

'I shall not say,' replied Alistair calmly.

'I think you ought to. It is a serious matter for all of us; and though, of course, the girls are not likely to steal their own Cups, still there are the servants, and it is very uncomfortable for them,' said Brenda.

Brenda spoke in rather a peremptory tone, and Miss Eagen looked at her reprovingly. 'There is no "ought" in the matter. Alistair has a perfect right to keep her suspicions to herself; in fact, she is very wise. I fancy she and I have the same idea about the thief or thieves. But I shall not say what I think either,' said Miss Eagen.

But still she talked of the matter, and two or three times addressed a remark to Phyllis on the all-absorbing subject.

The girls felt, somehow, that there was some mystery that they could not fathom, and the elder girls had a consultation after supper as to what they should do.

'I believe Alistair is at the bottom of it, and I'm sure Katherine thinks so too,' declared Brenda.

'I think we ought to go to Miss Caruthers and demand an inquiry among the girls,' said Davidine.

'Yes; let's have it out. You go and ask her,' said Brenda.

Davidine accordingly went off, but came back crestfallen. 'Miss Caruthers says she could not undertake such a thing without Miss Dolling's authority, and she won't ask her. She says if we want to, we may ask her ourselves,' announced Davidine.

'Well, let us,' said Brenda. 'I'm ready.—Aren't you, Alice?'

'Alice was still in the dumps, and had not said much on the subject. 'No; I won't have anything to do with it,' she said flatly.

'One would think you were in the business. Really, every one is too odd. I am for appealing to Miss Dolling. Who votes for it?'

'I vote for it,' said Katherine, to every one's surprise.

'That settles it. To Miss Dolling, girls!' cried Brenda.

'You and Davidine go,' they urged, and the two friends went off to Miss Dolling.

The Head-mistress heard them to the end, and then said, 'Have you any suspicions?'

'We don't like to say,' they replied.

'I think in this case it is justifiable to say what or whom you suspect,' said Miss Dolling.

'We don't know exactly what we suspect, except that it's one of the girls who has done it by mistake or something,' blurted out Brenda.

'This is not a thing about which one could make a mistake,' said Miss Dolling decidedly. 'I would rather you called things by their proper name. This is either a theft or a trick, and if it is the latter, the perpetrator ought to own up, seeing in what an awkward position her silence places the servants and others in the house.'

'That is why we want an inquiry,' said Davidine eagerly. She felt that Alistair would clear herself if there were an inquiry.

Brenda did not believe in Alistair's innocence, and wished the mystery cleared up for the sake of others.

Miss Dolling considered a little, then said, 'I think the best way will be to speak to the girls in Big School after prayers to-morrow morning.'

'Oh, Miss Dolling, couldn't we have it in Lorne House? It will be such a disgrace to us if they have to be shown up before the whole school!' cried Davidine.

'They should have thought of that before. They have had two days to confess,' said Miss Dolling.

There was no more to be said, and the two went back to Lorne House very depressed.

'A nice mess we've got into,' said Brenda angrily, 'and just because one girl is a sneak or a sleep-walker.'

'Who's a sneak?' retorted Phyllis.

'Whoever took those Cups and won't own up, and lets the servant-girls be suspected,' replied Brenda. 'I should like to give her a piece of my mind. Anyway, she'll be sorry to-morrow, for no one will speak to her when she is known.'

'Oh, won't they? Then you'd better stop talking to me now, for I did it!' announced Phyllis.

'And so did I!' 'And I!' 'And I!' cried the other culprits.

'You, Phyllis? You must be daft! What did you do it for?' cried Davidine.

'To pay you out for not letting us come to the lecture,' announced Phyllis; 'but I would never have touched the silly old Cups if I had known there was going to be all this fuss about them.'

'Then you had better go and tell Miss Caruthers,' said Davidine.

'I am glad you have had the courage to speak at last. I was wondering how much longer you would keep this up,' said Miss Caruthers quietly.

'Did you guess?' asked Davidine afterwards.

'Yes; and so did Alistair. I fancy she overheard something which made her search in that particular spot for hidden treasure.'

'And she never said anything?' exclaimed Brenda.

'And I should think you wish you had never said anything either,' said Davidine.

Brenda looked annoyed, but it was with herself. 'I'll make it up to her,' she said with a laugh.

The culprits were stopped games for a week, which shut them out of the matches. And the tale of the disappearance of the Lorne House Cups was not alluded to in public, and, above all, not before Lorne House girls, with whom it was a sore subject.

'I knew you had nothing to do with it,' said Winifred triumphantly to Alistair. 'And, what do you think, Alice said so too.'

'Did she?' said Alistair, looking pleased. She made up her mind now to say something to Alice about it, and see if she could help her in her trouble, whatever it was.

CHAPTER XXX.

PACKING-DAY.

THERE was just a fortnight to the Christmas holidays, and the bookbinding girls were working overtime in the workshops to get their Christmas presents finished; the carpentry and wood-carving classes were hammering, gluing, and polishing bookshelves, tables, and frames with the same object.

Alistair, who was carving a stool for Jeanie's feet (which she would never dream of desecrating in such a way), found herself next Alice in the carpenters' shop.

'I want to thank you for having stood up for me the other day,' said Alistair in the interval of sand-papering the top of her stool, talking in moderation being allowed in the workshop.

Alice was so taken aback that she stopped in the middle of gluing her bookshelf, and let the glue harden on her brush. '*You* have nothing to thank me for. Please don't do it now; it only makes me feel worse than I do,' she said.

'Why should it make you feel bad to be thanked? And why do you feel bad at all? Please tell me,' said Alistair.

'I'd rather not talk about it,' said Alice brusquely.

'Then, of course, I won't ask you; but I should like to make you feel better if I could,' said Alistair.

'You can't; nobody can, thank you,' replied Alice.

'Why not? Has anybody you care for died?' inquired Alistair.

'Oh no; it's only myself, and you can't help it,' said Alice. Her manner was so brusque that Alistair very nearly gave up trying to break down her reserve, a difficult task for a reserved Scotch girl; but she determined to make one more effort.

'Do you mean that you are ill, or'—as Alice shook her head—'is it that you are worrying about something? Because if it is not a secret, I wish you would tell me about it. Sometimes, if one tells a friend, it doesn't worry one so much,' she said.

'You call yourself my friend! If you only knew; I have been your enemy ever since you came to Nun's Eaton! I hated you! I don't know why I hated you, but I did; and I turned the other girls against'—— The words had been coming fast, but Alice faltered, and then said, 'And I made your horse run away that day, when you were not looking and were not prepared.'

'But I forgave all that long ago; so if that is all you are worrying about, you need not feel bad any more,' replied Alistair earnestly.

'But I do, because I might have killed you, and Katherine too; and that day, skating, when I was in the water I got entangled in my cloak. For one dreadful moment I thought I was drowning, and it all came back to me, and I felt so wicked,' said Alice.

'There was no danger of your killing me, because I am too used to horses, and that was not a vicious one; and, you see, Katherine was not hurt either, so you should be thankful for that instead of being miserable. And I know you do not like people to talk of religion, but if you don't mind my doing it this time, one can pray for forgiveness if one has done wrong,' said Alistair simply.

There was no one near to hear her except Alice, for which the latter was perhaps thankful. But this time Alice did not think her schoolfellow mad, though she did not answer for a minute, and then said, 'Thank you, I feel better now.'

Then the carpentry mistress came along to examine their work, and praised them both. 'That is a very creditable piece of carpentry, Alice. It is solid, and won't go to pieces as some of our girls' work do.—And this is very good too, Alistair. It is very accurate. I should imagine you are a very truthful person,' she observed.

'Why, what has that to do with wood-carving?' asked another of the class. 'Do you mean to say

an untruthful carpenter could not make as good a stool as that?'

'He could make as good a stool by practice; but one would find inaccuracies if one looked close, unless he had corrected them. At least, that is my theory. I always think one can judge a girl's character from her work.'

'How unpleasant! I never thought you were reading us like that. And, besides, it is not true. Look how bad my photo-frame is, and I am not untruthful,' said the girl who had spoken first.

'No; but you are careless and impatient. Look at those leaves,' said the mistress.

The girls laughed, for they were characteristic of the worker, who gave them an extra vein or two that she had forgotten; and the girl laughed too.

They worked steadily for two hours overtime, and the last touch being put to their productions, the owners walked off triumphantly with them under their arms.

'Davidine, extraordinary though it seems, I believe Alice has been worrying about that wretched bookshelf she has been making, for she has actually laughed this evening,' said Brenda that night to her chum.

'She certainly seems more like her old self, only wiser. But I can't imagine why the bookshelf should have worried her: it 's only for the uncle she lives with, and she 's not so very devoted to him,' replied Davidine.

'The ways of girls are mysterious. Anyway, she has left off looking like a blighted being, which is a blessing,' said Brenda lightly.

'She does not speak so rudely, so her trouble, whatever it is, has done good and been a blessing in disguise,' said the more observant Davidine.

But neither of them knew then or later the true facts of the case.

And now the days passed quickly till packing-day came, and the girls were to be seen everywhere like ants toiling up and downstairs with packets of books and bundles of clothes, which had to be stuffed somehow into trunks which had been full with two-thirds of their present contents, and that when packed by experienced hands.

Alistair, whose packing was quickly done, stood looking out over the hills with shining eyes. She had a letter in her hand; it was on foreign paper, and Katherine, who came up at that moment, looking at it guessed that it was from Mr and Mrs Comyns in the West Indies.

'Have you good news, Alistair?' she inquired.

'Yes, thank you. Mother writes to say they are well, and I am to go home to Craigie for the holidays,' replied Alistair.

'To Craigie! Then you are not going to spend Christmas with us?' cried Katherine in disappointed tones.

Alistair looked at her cousin in surprise. 'I

never thought—I mean, I thought I should be a bother,' she stammered.

'No, indeed; I was looking forward to having you. But, of course, I understand that you want to go to Craigie,' said Katherine.

Alistair had a struggle with herself; then she said, 'I should like to go to Craigie, of course, and papa wants me to go; but—I wonder, would you care to come with me after Christmas, if I went home with you now?'

Katherine's face showed her pleasure.

'We could ride, and Alick, our factor's son, would soon teach you how to jump,' said Alistair, who knew that her cousin's bad horsemanship was a great vexation to her.

'I should love it; and we could skate too, couldn't we?' she asked.

So when Major and Mrs Kerr arrived in the motor to fetch the two girls, they were greeted with the request that they would take or send them up to Scotland after Christmas.

'You want to ride and skate? Upon my word, that is a miraculous change, Katherine! It seems to me that instead of their taming our wild bird here, she has imbued you with her own ideas. Well, well, there's no understanding feminine ways; and, upon my word, you look better than I've ever known you to do. And Alistair here is improved too. They do you credit, Amy,' said the Major.

'I don't know that I had much to do with it,' Miss Dolling replied.

Mrs Kerr said nothing; she saw that the poetess daughter had gone, for the present at any rate, and that a more healthy, less self-satisfied girl had taken her place, and she knew that it was the result of the atmosphere of Miss Dolling's school, and of her intercourse with her cousin Alistair; and that it was a change for the better. So she willingly seconded her husband's suggestion that they should all go north with Alistair.

'And this time we shall not be welcomed from the chimney-top—eh, Alistair?' he remarked.

Alistair laughed heartily. 'I was a savage—wasn't I, Uncle James? Three months of conventional English school-life has taught me better than that. I feel three years older, not three months,' she said with a sigh; although she added quickly, 'But I have been very happy here, and I wouldn't leave Nun's Eaton for the world.'

THE END.

Edinburgh:
Printed by W. & R. Chambers, Limited